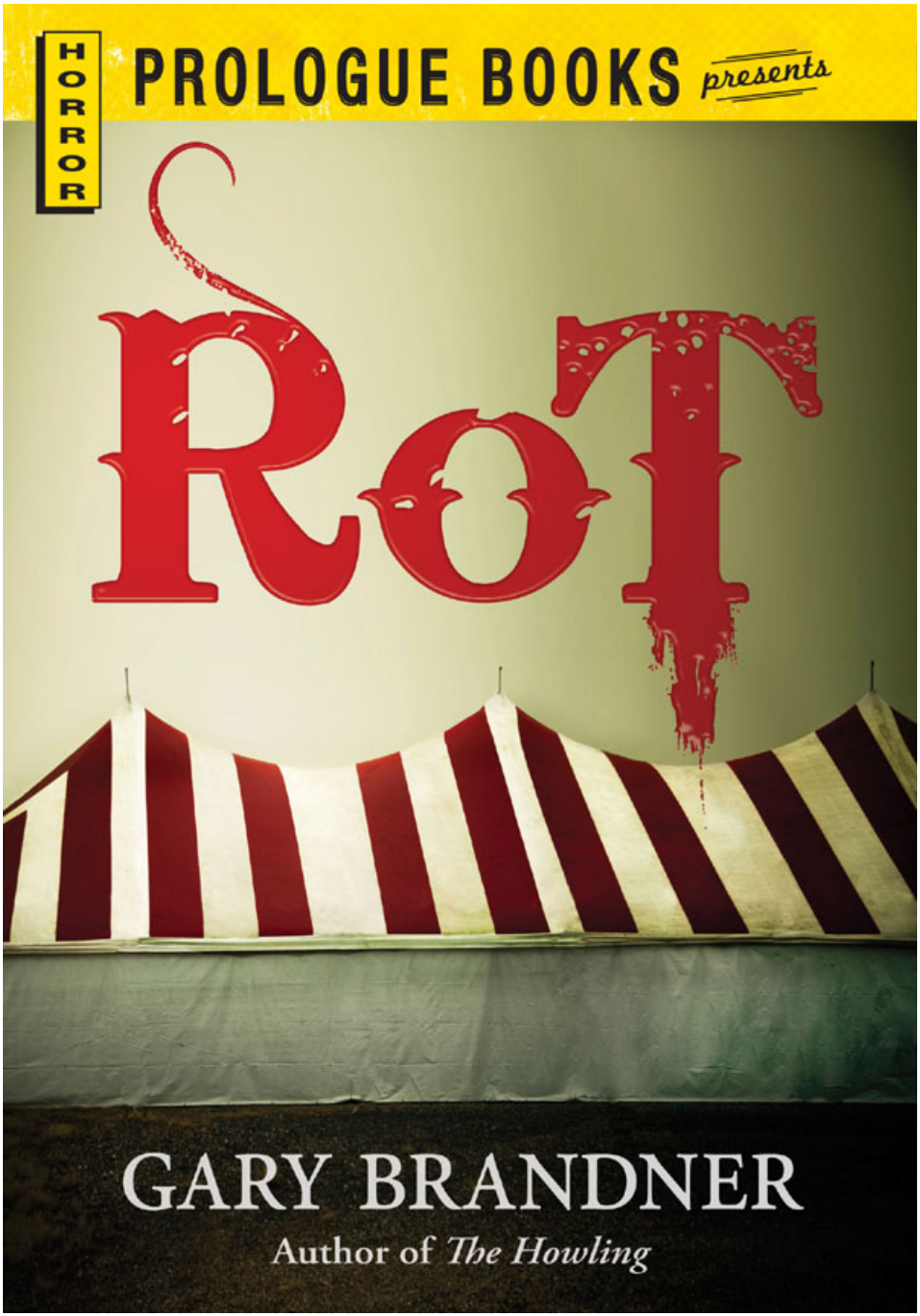
HORROR
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Author of The Howling

ROT

Gary Brandner

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For all the Brandners and the Gehrmans in Wisconsin.
They may rest assured that the only character in this story
based on reality is the dog.

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ONE

On the other side of the dusty bus window the Wisconsin towns slid past like a faded diorama in some worn-out theme park. Yesterdayland. Slinger, Allerton, Theresa, Horricon, Waupon, Fisk. As far as Kyle Brubaker could tell it was the same town over and over. He saw himself on a *Twilight Zone* rerun doomed to ride forever through deadly boring farmland, past silos and windmills and bleak little towns with their names painted on water towers. The Greyhound from Hell.

Gradually, childhood memories stirred as the town names became more familiar. New London, Bear Creek, Sugar Bush, Clintonville. When he was eight Kyle's parents had brought him back to Bischoff, Wisconsin for a month to visit Grandpa Reuthman's farm. Deadly. The only kid living there, his cousin Carney, was a year older and no fun at all. Kyle's lasting memories were of vicious mosquitoes and heat lightning and men in rough clothing who smelled of the barn. Blessedly, he had not been asked to make the trip again. Not until now.

This should have been his summer of fun. His last as a student. Next year he would graduate from UCLA and would have to go out into the real world and find a job, for Chrissake. Now, while his buddies were catching the waves off Point Dume or checking the action at the hot new clubs, he was on his way back to what was now Uncle Bob's farm.

And on a *bus*, if you could believe it. The only time you rode a bus in Los Angeles was when your car was in the shop and you had no choice. Now Kyle's funky little Jeep Wrangler sat home in the Brentwood garage while he shifted and squirmed in the seat of a

Greyhound bus.

From his slouched position Kyle let his eyes dust over the other passengers. Farmers, most of them, he guessed, from the sunburns that ended at collar and wrist. A couple of overweight women fanning themselves. Was everybody in Wisconsin fat? Maybe there was a state law. Directly behind him was a baby that alternately cried and puked. Didn't those things ever sleep? And way in the back sat three silent and stony Indians. Not a fun group.

The flight from LAX to Mitchell Field in Milwaukee had been more Kyle Brubaker's style. He'd drunk Coors beer and kidded around with a high-assed little stewardess. He could probably have made a date with her if he had been staying in the city. But noooo. Once he stepped out of the plane reality hit. He was Bischoff bound, and the only way to get there from Milwaukee was on the bus.

Kyle allowed himself the luxury of a little hatred. He hated Uncle Bob for not selling Grandpa's farm when the old man died, and for then having a stroke trying to run it himself. And he hated his cousin Carney for not staying home with Uncle Bob where he belonged. He hated the bus passengers just for being there, and he hated the state of Wisconsin on principle.

He recalled Cousin Carney for a little additional hatred. If his stupid cousin hadn't joined the stupid army out of high school and marched off to some stupid camp in the state of Washington, he would be home now attending to his father's farm and Kyle would be catching the rays and building his tan. The *army*, for Chrissake. Who joined the army any more? Cousin Carney, that's who.

The air brakes hissed and the bus shuddered to a stop.

"Bischoff." The driver did not bother to turn around with his announcement.

Kyle grabbed his red nylon roll bag from the overhead rack and made his way between the rows of seats to the front of the bus. The farmers ignored him, the fat women wheezed, the baby yowled, and

the Indians remained silent. Kyle paused at the door to give them a farewell wave. Nobody waved back.

He stepped down from the bus onto the asphalt of Main Street. Kyle did not have to look for a street sign. In this part of the country they were always Main Street. The rubber lips of the bus door flapped shut and the Greyhound from hell rumbled away to drop its motley load in other anonymous towns.

Kyle took a despairing look at his surroundings. Behind him was the Rexall Drug Store, which also served as the bus depot. Across the street was the post office, New Emporium Department Store, and the Shawano County court house. To his right was Dave & Emma's Tavern, Salzman Ford, and the Majestic Theater with an empty marquee. To his left the Senate Cigar Store and Happy Otto Inn. Bookending Main Street were the Idle Hour and Thriftway Grocery and Liquor. That was it for Bischoff, Wisconsin. It was not, Kyle observed, Hollywood Boulevard.

Here and there saw grass sprouted through cracks in the asphalt. The sidewalks were nearly empty of pedestrians. At midday in June, Kyle supposed, everybody was out in the fields planting or plowing or harvesting or whatever the hell they did. A stooped man in bib overalls shuffled by and looked at him with narrowed eyes. A little girl clutched her mother's skirts, and they detour ed around him. He was probably the first stranger in town since the Carter administration.

A sudden snarl behind him spun Kyle around. A pimply-faced kid with heavy upper arms sat astride a bright yellow Kawasaki. He wore a black muscle shirt and leather jeans, and sneered at Kyle as he gave the three-cylinder engine another goose. He had a bad punk haircut and pouty Elvis lips. As Kyle met his eye the kid revved the throttle a couple more times then kicked the yellow cycle off down Main Street.

Kyle let the breath hiss out between his teeth. *Welcome to*

Bischoff.

A big dusty Plymouth Caravelle rolled down Main Street and came to a stop in front of the bus bench. A woman leaned across the front seat and looked him up and down. She had a lean, weathered face and sharp little eyes that didn't miss much.

"Kyle Brubaker?"

"That's me."

"I'm Dorothy Simms."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm supposed to bring you back to your Uncle Bob's."

She didn't sound too happy about it. Fair enough, neither was he. Kyle tossed his bag into the back seat and got in next to the woman. The interior of the Plymouth was littered with tools, greasy rags, and scraps of metal and leather. It smelled of farm animals.

The woman swung the car in a U-turn. No problem, considering the lack of traffic on Main Street. She headed north out of town. In less than a minute Bischoff was behind them.

Kyle peered gloomily out at the pasture land, the barns, the fences, the patches of hardwood forest. The woman's silence got on his nerves. Somebody, he felt, ought to say something.

He gave it a try. "This is my first time back in fifteen years."

"That so?"

"I was six years old. Don't remember much about it."

"I s'pose not."

"No."

So much for the conversation. Kyle settled down with a sigh and watched the telephone poles march by.

After three miles of silence the woman swung the Plymouth off the blacktop, across the railroad tracks, and up a hard-packed dirt drive toward a cluster of outbuildings and a two-story clapboard house with a mansard roof. There was an expanse of green lawn in front of the house. Behind it lay a vegetable garden, then the fence.

Beyond, pasture land rolled off to a patch of woods. As the car pulled in a caramel and white collie came wagging and barking toward them.

Mrs. Simms parked next to one of the outbuildings and set the brake. “Here we are,” she said.

“So I see.” Kyle got out and retrieved his bag as the dog sniffed curiously at his feet. He held out a hand. The dog licked at it and gave him a friendly bark. *At least somebody’s glad to see me*.

Mrs. Simms strode off toward the house. Kyle gave the dog a pat on the rump and followed. Oh, yes, this was going to be one hell of a fun summer.

TWO

The farmhouse was at least eighty years old, but it looked solid enough to withstand an earthquake. If they had earthquakes in Wisconsin. The house was painted a dull mustard with brown trim around the windows, and a gray-shingled roof. It was a color scheme that Kyle found depressing. At least the paint job looked fresh.

The gloomy aspect of the house was lightened somewhat by bright curtains in the windows and flower beds along both sides of the path that led to the porch that extended the width of the house. There was even a porch swing suspended by chairs. Kyle thought those things existed only in nostalgic old movies.

A tractor mower chugged into view around the corner of the house as Kyle and Mrs. Simms approached. In the driver's saddle was a copper-skinned man in a sleeveless jacket and black felt hat. The driver looked over toward the house as Kyle followed the woman up on the porch. The wide hat brim threw a shadow across the man's face, making his expression unreadable.

Mrs. Simms pulled open the screen and the oak paneled door behind it and walked inside. Kyle followed. It was cool, and there was the faint musty odor that lingers in old houses. The smell of people and pets long gone, dinners long ago cooked and eaten. A smell of the past.

A high-ceilinged hallway with rooms on both sides led from the front door to the far end of the house. A stairway with a well-worn bannister climbed to the floor above. To the right of the door an archway opened into a room cluttered with overstuffed chairs and couches, mismatched tables, knickknack shelves, an upright piano,

and an antique standing Victrola.

"I'll go see if your uncle's awake," Mrs. Simms said. "You can wait in the parlor."

The parlor. Kyle walked into the room feeling like he was in a museum. Although there was no system to the arrangement, everything seemed somehow to be in the place it belonged. The furniture was old without being antique, and showed signs of regular cleaning. The faded carpet with its tangled floral pattern did not match the curlicued wallpaper.

Kyle hit a couple of keys on the piano and winced at the twangy discord. He opened the doors of the Victrola cabinet and pulled out several of the records stored below. They were old 78s in paper jackets with labels he'd never heard of. Brunswick. Bluebird. Okeh. He eased the records carefully back into the cabinet and prowled around the room.

From a marble-topped table he picked up a 12-inch model of a birchbark canoe so delicate he feared it would crumple in his hands. He put it back quickly. There were pictures everywhere, on the tables, on shelves, hanging on the walls. Most of them were posed black and white photographs of people dressed in the fashions of past generations. It gave Kyle an odd feeling to look into the photo faces. These people had lived, loved and sinned, possibly right in this room, and had gone their way, each leaving behind a little bit of himself.

He wandered around feeling himself pulled back into past generations of his mother's family as chronicled in the photographs. He recognized great-grandfather Henry Reuthman of the fierce red beard who arrived from Germany in the 1880s. There was a yard-long photo of Grandpa's World War I company lined up outside their barracks in campaign hats and the leggings of 1918. There were childhood pictures of his mother, her brother Bob, and her sister Helen, who had disgraced the family by marrying a black

musician, of whom there were no pictures present. Kyle reflected that he would rather be visiting Aunt Helen, wherever she was, than here. There was a fading color photo of Uncle Bob in unfamiliar suit and tie for his wedding. And Aunt Esther standing beside him, fresh and pretty before the cancer started to eat her.

Cousin Carney was much in evidence. In football uniform, The Bischoff Bisons, helmet under his arm, hair tousled, smiling in victory. And again, looking earnest in high school cap and gown. A recent studio shot in his army uniform.

Kyle came to a stop at a blown-up color snapshot of Carney in swim trunks, one tanned arm around a laughing girl whose red-blonde hair glinted with sunny highlights. The girl wore a modest swimsuit that would never have made *Sports Illustrated*, yet she exuded a wholesome sexiness that caused a stirring in Kyle's pants. Cousin Carney was apparently not a complete dork.

"Your uncle's awake." Mrs. Simms' voice startled Kyle out of a contemplation of the girl's flaring hips and sculptured legs. "You can go on up. Top of the stairs on the right."

"Thanks." Kyle spoke to the woman's narrow back as she marched away up the hall.

He climbed the stairs and walked through the open door into his uncle's bedroom. The window was open, but a breeze that fluttered the curtains would not blow away the sickroom smell.

His uncle lay propped by three pillows, a patchwork quilt covering him to the chest. A metal and canvas wheelchair stood empty in a corner. Leaning against the wall was a pair of aluminum crutches, the kind with braces to fit around the arms. Uncle Bob held out a bony left hand, reaching across his body while his right stayed under the quilt.

"Kyle, glad you could come." The words were faintly slurred, and the smile was lopsided, but Uncle Bob seemed in fair shape, considering. "Damn nuisance being laid up. They tell me I'll be

good as new, but it'll take time."

Kyle took the hand, which gripped his strongly. "Glad I can help out." It was a flat out lie, but what else could he say.

"I'm darn glad to have you here, at least until Carney gets home."

"Uh, when do you think that will be?"

"He's due to be discharged in September, but family hardship may get him out earlier."

"Let's hope so," Kyle said, truthfully this time.

"Did Mrs. Simms show you your room?"

"Not yet. I just got here."

"You'll be up here at the end of the hall. It's a nice room, bathroom right across from it. Hasn't been used in a while, but Mrs. Simms will have it all aired out and scrubbed up for you."

"She doesn't say a whole lot, Mrs. Simms."

Uncle Bob gave him the crooked smile. "Don't worry about it, she's that way with everybody. Even if I didn't know her I'd put up with a lot for her cooking. Wait'll you taste it. I'll bet you put on a few pounds yourself before you leave."

Kyle faked a chuckle.

"Course, you look to be in pretty good shape. Your mom tells me you were on the boxing team out at UCLA."

"Not exactly. I did a little intramural boxing for my fraternity."

"Your nose is still straight, so you must be pretty good."

"It's no big deal. We use pillow gloves and headgear. Anyway, I don't plan to make it a career."

"That's good." Uncle Bob's smile faded. His right eye drooped slightly. "What *do* you plan to make your career, Kyle?"

"Well, I'm majoring in business and accounting." There were times when Kyle wished he could say *astronaut* or *bank robber* or anything to grab people's attention and avoid the half-disappointed expression now clouding his uncle's face.

“Like your father.”

Kyle shrugged. “Dad’s in corporate finance. I’m still not sure where I’ll wind up.”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine, whatever you choose. How much do you know about farming?”

“Zippo.”

The lopsided smile returned. “That figures. Not much in the way of open land out in Los Angeles, I guess.” He pronounced it Los Angaleez with a hard *g*.

“When they find some they build homes on it,” Kyle said.

“Well, you won’t have to know much to help out around here. Mrs. Simms runs the house. Has for years.” He nodded toward the open window through which could be heard the tractor mower below on the lawn. “Amos Deerfoot takes care of the stock, the machinery, and the fields.”

“Deerfoot?”

“He’s an Indian. Damn good man. Hardest worker I ever saw.”

Kyle hesitated, framing the question carefully. “Uncle Bob, with everything so well taken care of, what do you need me for?”

“Just to keep an eye on things. I like to have somebody here who’s family.”

Terrific. “I’ll do what I can.”

“You’ll be fine.” He shifted his body under the quilt with some difficulty. “You’re probably hungry.”

“I ate on the plane.”

Uncle Bob snorted. “Airline food. All tastes like cardboard. Go on down and tell Mrs. Simms to fix you something to hold you until supper. Before you go, can you hand me that ball on the table?”

Kyle picked up a red sponge ball and held it out to his uncle. The stricken man reached under the covers with his left hand and carried his right up as though it were not attached to him. He took the ball from Kyle and placed it in his limp right palm. His fingers

twitched toward the ball.

“I’m supposed to exercise between therapy sessions. You go on down and see about some food.”

Kyle understood that his uncle did not want him to watch. “I *am* hungry,” he said. “I’ll talk to you later.”

He went back downstairs and followed the hallway to the other end of the house where he found the kitchen. Unlike the cluttered if comfortable parlor, this room sparkled with bright new appliances. Gleaming copper-bottomed pans hung in order of their size over a range that looked like the bridge of the *Enterprise*. The kitchen smelled warmly of fresh milk and home-baked bread. A breakfast nook looked out over the garden lawn behind the house and the rolling pasture land beyond.

Mrs. Simms stood with her back to him, chopping at something at a butcher-block table.

“Uh, Mrs. Simms — ” he began when she did not look up.

She turned abruptly and handed him a plate with several fat red radishes and a fat sandwich on yellow bread. “I expect you could eat something.”

He took the plate from her. “I sure could. Thanks.”

“There’s milk in the refrigerator.” She looked him up and down. “Or beer if you want it. I guess you’re old enough.” Without further conversation she left him and he could hear her clumping up the stairs.

He took a bottle of Miller’s from the refrigerator and carried it with the sandwich out to the breakfast nook. The sandwich was thick sliced roast beef with mustard and sweet red onions. Kyle ate with sudden ravenous hunger. Washing it down with long gulps of beer.

Someone rattled the back door. Kyle looked down the hall for Mrs. Simms, didn’t see her. He swallowed the last of the beer and went to the door.

He opened it to see a girl carrying a basket of milky yellow pears. She had red-gold hair, a pert nose, startling blue eyes. It took Kyle a minute to recognize her in the full skirt and peasant blouse. Then he visualized the body underneath, put it into a swimsuit, and saw the girl in the picture with his cousin Carney.

"Hi," she said after waiting for him to say something. "I'm Marianne Avery. You must be Kyle from California."

"That's me. Am I wearing a name tag or something?"

The girl shrugged. "Nobody comes to visit in a town the size of Bischoff without word getting around."

"I guess not. Come on in."

"I can't stay," she said, setting the basket of pears down on the counter. "I brought these over for your uncle."

"They look good."

"They are. We've got a tree out in back, and it always has a lot more fruit than we can eat."

"Well, thanks. Do you want to go up and see my Uncle Bob?"

"No, I don't want to bother him. How is he?"

"He's … gee, I don't know, I just got here. He's not moving around much, but his mind seems OK."

"That's a blessing anyway. Well, nice meeting you, Kyle." She turned and started out the door.

"Marianne … wait a minute."

She turned and looked at him expectantly. Kyle felt the stirring in his crotch again. He said, "Uh, would you like a beer? Or something?"

"Can't. I've got to get back to work."

"Where do you work?"

"The New Emporium. That's our department store. At least until Walmart moves in."

"I saw it when I got off the bus."

"You couldn't miss it. My father's the manager. I'm just

working there for the summer."

"What happens in the fall?"

"That depends. Daddy wants me to go to college. Carney, your cousin, wants to get married. I haven't really made up my mind."

"You and Carney are … that serious?"

Marianne absently touched her ring finger. "There's nothing official. We've been more or less going together ever since I can remember. A lot of people take it for granted we'll get married."

"Including Carney?"

"I guess so. I haven't seen him for nine months."

"Do you think he'd object to you doing something with me? I mean it's all in the family."

Marianne cocked her head and looked at him from an angle. "What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know. Going out. What is there to do around here for fun?"

"Quite a lot, as a matter of fact. I guess it depends on your idea of fun. But to answer your first question, yes, I think Carney might very well object."

"Well, then — "

"But he doesn't make my decisions for me."

"That's good. Will you think about it?"

"Maybe." Marianne gave her fine head of hair a shake and went out the door. "See you."

Kyle watched from the kitchen window as the girl swung across the lawn, got into a red Mustang, and drove back out the dirt roadway. He grinned for the first time since leaving Los Angeles.

Just maybe this wouldn't be such a rotten summer after all.

THREE

For the next two days Kyle wandered around the farm, looking for something to occupy his mind. His thoughts returned often to Marianne Avery and what his chances were of seeing her again and maybe getting intimate. When he was not fantasizing about Marianne he wondered what his buddies were doing back in California. Having a better time than he was, that was a stone fact.

He found that, as Uncle Bob said, there was really very little for him to do around here. Mrs. Simms ran the house with a cold efficiency, and needed no help from anybody. Amos Deerfoot handled everything else. The Indian was, if anything, even less talkative than the housekeeper. Kyle's attempts at conversation with him died in uncomfortable silence.

Uncle Bob remained cheerful and upbeat despite his partial paralysis. Still, Kyle dreaded the time he had to spend with him in the sickroom. No offense to his uncle, but decay of the human body depressed Kyle something fierce. Among his suntanned surfing buddies anything less than robust good health was considered a critical defect.

One bright spot for Kyle was the dog. A handsome mixed collie named Fritz, he took quickly to Kyle and enjoyed bounding along with him across the pasture and through the grove of silver birches to the creek that bordered the farm. Once there the dog would plunge in and swim joyously to the far bank and back again. At Kyle's whistle he would clamber out, shake himself vigorously, and look up grinning.

In the evenings he enjoyed watching the dog work. Amos Deerfoot would say, "Go get the cows, Fritz," and the dog would

race eagerly off across the pasture to herd the dozen or so cows efficiently back to the barn, nipping at the heels of the laggards, and not allowing them to stray.

Entertaining though the dog was, Fritz was not enough to fill Kyle's days. At noon on the third day he borrowed the Caravelle and drove into the town of Bischoff. Anything to break the monotony of the farm. Main Street, he noted as he drove into the town, had not livened up any since his arrival.

One advantage the town did have over Los Angeles was that you could find a parking place. There were no meters, no time limits, no red-painted curb, just a lot of space along both sides of Main Street between the dusty cars of the locals. He braked to a stop across from the New Emporium, and realized that's where he had been going all along.

The New Emporium was about the size of one of the smaller Sav-On Drug Stores in Los Angeles. The layout of the place looked like no department store Kyle had ever been in. There were counters with actual live clerks behind them. Kyle stood staring around like a first-time visitor to Disneyland.

A floorwalker with a real carnation in his buttonhole approached with a friendly smile. "Can I help you find something?"

"I was looking for Marianne Avery."

"She works back in Books and Stationery, but …" he took out an old fashioned watch on a chain. "… she's on her lunch break right now. Can somebody else help you?"

"No thanks. I'll come back."

He walked out feeling a little dizzy. You simply did not expect human contact when you went into a store these days. You grabbed your purchase and stood in a checkout line. It took some getting used to.

It was twenty minutes past noon. Marianne was probably not due back at work until one o'clock. He surveyed the street for some

place to kill the time. Dave & Emma's Tavern looked as good as any.

He chose Dave's not because it looked more inviting than the Happy Otto Inn or the Idle Hour, but it was closest. He entered through an open doorway and sat down at the bar across from a neon triangle with the Blatz Beer logo inside. The afternoon trade consisted of a couple of geezers, a rawboned farmhand in bib overalls, a hefty woman in her mid-fifties, and two young girls who had a lot to learn about makeup. Behind the bar was a woman with a dime-size mole on her cheek and forearms like Popeye. Emma, he guessed.

"What'll it be?" the woman said.

"What's on tap?"

"Miller's and Miller's Lite."

"Miller's."

While the big woman expertly filled a beer glass from the tap, Kyle glanced around at the other patrons. They looked at him and away again showing no sign of any interest or opinion one way or the other. It was a look he was coming to think of as the Wisconsin Stare.

A few minutes later when his glass was half empty, there was the sound of a commotion out in the street. Shouts, curses, and the unmistakable wet smack of a fist hitting flesh. The old men, the farmhand, and the girls left their stools and went to the doorway to see what was going on. The big-armed bartender stayed put and the fat woman continued to drink.

Kyle edged his way between the others and stepped outside. A familiar yellow Custom Kawasaki was angled in at the curb. A boy's bicycle lay half on the sidewalk and half in the street. The heavy-shouldered punk in the muscle shirt Kyle had seen the day he arrived was standing spraddle-legged on the sidewalk and beating the crap out of a dark, frail looking kid. The smaller boy held his

hands up in a futile attempt to ward off the blows. As Kyle watched the kid took a blow to the forehead and fell to the ground. The biker picked him up by the front of his shirt and hit him in the face. The boy's lower lip split open and blood ran down his chin.

A ragged semi-circle of watchers had now gathered around the one-sided fight. Nobody said anything. Nobody moved to interfere. The bartender came to the tavern doorway and stood behind Kyle.

"What's going on?" he asked her.

"A fight. What does it look like?"

"Kind of one-sided."

"So?"

"Shouldn't somebody do something?"

"Why? It's only a Gypsy."

The frail boy was on the ground again. The biker aimed a booted kick at his head. The boy managed to take it on his arm, but cried out in pain as the boot cracked against his elbow.

Without consciously making the decision, Kyle stepped out through the door and moved up behind the biker. He dropped a hand on the bare meaty shoulder and eased the guy back a step, spoiling the aim of his next kick.

"Don't you think that's about enough?" He had the sensation of standing off and watching somebody who looked like him make an ass of himself. Kyle had never fancied himself a heroic type, and would have been the last one to claim an affection for the underdog. Nevertheless, there he stood, and there he was stuck.

"Who the fuck are you?"

The biker's piggy little eyes glared into his. The pouty mouth twisted down at the corner.

"Why don't you leave the kid alone?"

The racing blood hammered in Kyle's ears. Except for the intramural boxing, which was more clowning around than real combat, he had not been in a serious confrontation since the sixth

grade.

"Get out of my face, dickhead."

He drew a deep breath. Evidently there was no avoiding it now. Kyle took his hand off the punk's shoulder and braced, but not quickly enough. The biker swung a roundhouse right sucker punch and caught him on the cheekbone. The blow sent him stumbling sideways into the brick wall of Dave's. He had forgotten Rule One: Land the first blow. The watching crowd made way for him, but remained eerily silent.

The biker, grinning and confident now, came at him to finish the job.

Kyle shook his head to clear it. The pimply biker was strong but clumsy. Everything outside the capsule of space that enclosed the two of them disappeared.

He concentrated on the biker's eyes. He saw them widen and knew where the next punch was coming from. He ducked easily under the swinging right fist and pumped both hands hard to the belly. The biker had powerful arm and shoulder muscles, but he had neglected the gut. Kyle's fists dug into the soft flesh, bringing a surprised grunt of pain.

The biker stepped back, not looking so sure of himself now. Kyle gave him no time to reassess the situation. He hit him in the nose with a straight left, followed with a right that caught him on the temple and staggered him. As the biker raised his hands to protect his face Kyle set himself. He put the power of his thigh, hip, shoulder, and arm into a left hook to the liver. It was a punch a young Mexican professional had demonstrated for him, and when properly delivered it could paralyze a man.

This one was properly delivered. The biker sagged to the sidewalk, gasping for breath, his right leg twitching.

There was no more fight in him. Kyle lowered his hands. He looked around in time to see the frail Gypsy kid pumping off up

Main Street on his bicycle. So much for thanks.

The biker got painfully to his feet and walked, bent over, to the Kawasaki. He clambered aboard, kicked it to life and gave Kyle one last glare.

“Fuck you, motherfucker.” With that he revved the engine and took off.

Kyle looked down and saw his hands were shaking. He hooked them in the waistband of his jeans to keep them still.

The farmhand in bib overalls sauntered over to him. “Nice punch, fella.” He gave Kyle a nod and strolled back into Dave’s.

As the rest of the watchers melted away, a few of them looked in Kyle’s direction. He could not swear to it, but the Wisconsin Stare seemed to have softened a little.

Someone touched his arm from the rear and he flinched.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to spook you.”

Marianne Avery stood there wearing an apple green blouse and straight navy skirt. She smelled like spring flowers and looked good enough to eat. Marianne reached up and lightly touched his cheekbone. Her fingers were cool and gentle as butterfly wings.

“Does that hurt?”

He felt like Rambo striding away from a couple hundred dead bad guys. “Nah. A scratch.”

Marianne smiled. “You said that just like Sylvester Stallone. Do you do that on purpose?”

Kyle relaxed with a laugh. “It just slipped out.”

“You’re kind of a showoff, aren’t you.”

“Hey — ”

“Oh, I don’t mean the fight. I mean the way you talk to people. To me.”

“You think so? That I’m a showoff?”

“Maybe it’s just California. I think you’re a little uncomfortable being real around people.”

“Well, thanks, Doctor. How much do I owe you?”

“Now quit it. I just wanted to tell you I thought you did a really brave thing.”

“You’re about the only one.”

“Oh, it was appreciated. People here just aren’t quick to accept strangers.”

“They don’t take much to Gypsies either, I guess.”

“Small towns have prejudices just like big cities. But I think it was more important who you hit than who you rescued.”

“Pizza-face?”

“That was Fabian Gerstner.”

“Should that mean something to me?”

“It does to people around here. He’s one of three brothers who live over in the next town.”

“There are three of them?”

Marianne nodded, frowning. “Fabian is baby. Jesse, he’s the middle one, is skinny and mean as a snake. Lloyd is the oldest and strongest. He’s already been in prison. The nastiest of the three …”

“Sounds like a terrific family.”

“Their father ran off when Fabian was born and their mother died about the time he started high school.”

“You’re going to tell me they’re disadvantaged youngsters?”

“No. They’re just plain bad. Nobody likes the Gerstners, but nobody messes with them either. If I were you I’d watch my back.”

“Thanks for the tip.”

“You’re welcome.” She gave him that melting smile, and started to turn away.

“Wait a minute.”

She turned back.

“Can I say something real and personal?”

“Sure.”

“I know you’re going with my cousin and all, and I’m not

trying to cut him out, but really, about you and me doing something together? I'm going crazy with boredom."

"You're asking me for a date?"

"Well … yeah."

"Because you're bored?"

"That's not the most important reason."

She pretended to think it over. "I guess it would be okay."

"Terrific. Just one thing … what do you do on a date around here?"

"There's always something. For instance, this week there's a carnival in Elkhorn City. That's fifteen miles north of here."

"A carnival? You mean merry-go-round and baseball throw and that junk?"

"Don't worry, Mr. Hollywood, there's a dance too on Saturday. I hear they've got a darn good band coming from Milwaukee."

"Sounds great. Let's do it."

"You can pick me up on Saturday night at seven o'clock."

"Great. Where do I find you?"

"At my house. My father will want to meet you before we go anywhere."

"Is he going to ask me what are my intentions?"

"Don't be smart. Go almost to the end of Main Street, just before the Thriftway, and turn left. My house is next to last one on the right side of the street." She looked back over her shoulder at the New Emporium. "I've got to get back to work. See you Saturday."

Kyle watched her walk away from him, strawberry hair bouncing against the back of her neck. He grinned, wincing at the small ache in his cheekbone, but he felt just fine.

FOUR

Kyle spent Saturday afternoon washing and waxing the Caravelle. When he could see his face grinning back at him from the caramel-colored hood, he started in on the interior. He cleaned out the junk, stacking it neatly in case there was something Uncle Bob wanted to save. He went over the vinyl upholstery with a damp chamois and finished up spraying the whole thing with an aerosol cinnamon scent he hoped would be seductive.

When he was finished, the Plymouth was still not something that would turn heads on a cruise down the Boulevard, but he could put Marianne Avery in next to him without being too embarrassed.

As he stood back admiring his work, a mutter of thunder sounded off toward the western horizon. Kyle glared up at the sky where clouds had been shading the day since late morning. *Yeah, right, go ahead and dump on me*, he thought, *everybody else does*.

He made a run into town to pick up a pint of vodka at the Thriftway. It never hurt to have an emergency bottle in the car. Although he was not in the habit of using them, he considered buying a pack of condoms. Then he conjured a picture of the Rexall pharmacist getting on the phone to Marianne's father.

"You know that young fella from California? Came in today, bought a box of rubbers. Just came right up and asked for 'em bold as brass. Who you s'pose he plans to use 'em on?"

"I don't know, but if I catch him sniffing around my daughter I'm breaking out the deer rifle."

No, condoms were probably not a good idea. If he did get lucky, and if Marianne did insist on protection, he could always buy some in the other town where he would not have to worry about

gossip.

He told Mrs. Simms he would not need supper tonight, but she insisted he eat something before going out.

"You're seeing Marianne Avery?" she asked, looking at him sternly.

"Yeah. We're, uh, going to that carnival over in …"

"Elkhorn City," Mrs. Simms supplied.

"Whatever. I haven't been to a carnival for years." Why did he feel so damn guilty? He was just taking the girl to a dance. It was not as if he was hitting on somebody's wife.

"That carnival comes to Elkhorn City every year. Your cousin Carney and Marianne used to go over there when he was home."

"Yeah, well, I'd better get going."

"Have a good time," said Mrs. Simms in a tone that meant, *Behave yourself, or else*.

Kyle escaped from the bright farm kitchen and walked out by the tool shed where the Plymouth was parked. He admired the soft gleam of the Plymouth's wax job. While thunder continued to mutter in the distance, and the clouds blotted out the stars, no rain had yet fallen to spoil his afternoon's shine job. He got in, shoved the paper bag with the vodka into the glove compartment, and drove out to the highway.

Following Marianne's directions, he found the Avery house with no trouble. There were only five houses on the entire quarter-mile length of the street. Hers was a solid two-story brick structure sheltered by the huge old Maple trees. The shrubbery was neatly trimmed, and a pair of tall alder bushes stood sentry duty at each side of the door. Marianne's Mustang was parked in the driveway. The open garage doors revealed the rear end of a Buick Electra.

Kyle parked in front of the house, got out, checked his fly, and marched up to the entrance.

He caught his breath when Marianne opened the door in

answer to his ring. She had on a fitted skirt of dark green Ultrasuede that stopped halfway up her thighs. She wore a white top with a wide collar and a neckline that revealed the beginning of the sweet valley between her breasts. Her strawberry hair was done back with casual strands spiraling down to her earlobes. Without getting as radical as the girls who went to L.A. rock clubs, she achieved a subdued sexuality.

"You look great," he said.

"Thank you." She lowered her voice. "Mom and Daddy are inside waiting to meet you. Think you can handle it?"

"Hey, I've swum with sharks. Lead me to 'em."

Mrs. Avery was a tall, graceful woman with Marianne's fine features. She sat gracefully with her hands folded in her lap. Marianne's father was short, balding and solidly built. His eyes appraised Kyle from behind bifocals.

"Mom, Daddy, this is Kyle Brubaker."

Mr. Avery shook his hand. His wife gave him a cool smile from her chair.

"We both knew your mother," Mr. Avery said. "She hasn't been back here for a few years."

"I guess not. She's pretty busy back home with her real estate and all."

"How does your father feel about her working?" Mrs. Avery asked.

"Oh, Dad's in favor of anything that makes Mom happy."

"A good attitude," Mr. Avery approved. "How's your Uncle Bob doing?"

"Not too badly, considering. He hopes to be up and around by September."

"That's good. I suppose Carney will be coming home about then."

The heavy reference to his cousin, Marianne's intended, was

not lost on Kyle. He put on his best Wally Cleaver smile and said, “Sooner, if he can arrange it.”

“We all like Carney a lot.”

I got the message, Mr. Avery! “Carney’s a likable guy, as I remember.” Kyle risked a glance at his watch.

Mrs. Avery caught it. “I think the young people want to be on their way, Frank.”

“No hurry, I just …”

Marianne jumped in. “They always start the dances early.”

“Well, you youngsters have a good time,” said Mr. Avery. “Don’t run out of gas, Kyle.” The last was said with a clumsy attempt at fatherly humor.

“Glad I met you both,” Kyle lied, and gratefully followed Marianne out the door.

“That went pretty well,” she said, sliding into the Caravelle.

“Better than a root canal.” He walked around the car and climbed in behind the wheel. “They’re counting on you to marry Carney, aren’t they.”

“I guess so.”

“Are you going to?”

“Probably.”

Kyle started the car and backed out of the driveway. “Do you love him?”

“Sure. Would I marry him otherwise?”

“A lot of people get married without being in love.”

“Well I’m not one of them.” Marianne shifted in her seat to indicate that the subject was closed. “Go back to Main Street and turn left. Elkhorn City is the next town east of here.”

Kyle followed the directions, and soon was rolling along the blacktopped Highway past Uncle Bob’s farm. Pasture land on both sides of the road was interspersed with thick groves of hardwood trees that crowded in close. Thunder rumbled somewhere up ahead

of them.

Kyle was silent, intent on his driving.

Marianne sighed. “Okay, I guess you’re wondering if I love Carney and plan to marry him, why am I going out with you?”

“It crossed my mind. Maybe because I’m such a hunk?”

“Because I’m human, more likely. Just once in a while I like to do something that doesn’t fit the girl next door image. I won’t say I don’t enjoy the attention, but there’s a lot of baggage that goes with being homecoming queen and all that. I’m supposed to be kind of a role model from the 1950s or something. The guys around here treat me like I’m made of glass. I’m not, you know.”

“So going out with me is like a kind of rebellion or something.”

“Well, you are the dangerous stranger from California. Who knows what might happen to me while you have me in your power?”

“Who knows.” Kyle reached over and placed his hand on the nyloned flesh of her thigh below the skirt. She picked it up firmly by the wrist and returned it to him.

“Which doesn’t mean I’m anybody’s easy lay.”

“Right.” Kyle got reinvolved with his driving.

Elkhorn City proved to be maybe twice as big a town as Bischoff, which still did not make it much by California standards. The lights of the carnival were visible from the edge of town. Sighting in on the Ferris wheel, Kyle found his way with no directions from Marianne. The parking lot was a vast field of packed down dirt and stubbly grass with a lot more space than there were cars.

“The county fair in August draws more people,” Marianne explained.

“Oh, sure.”

Kyle parked the Caravelle near a gnarled oak tree where he could find it again. They crossed the lot and walked under the

brightly lit arch onto the carnival grounds. There was recorded calliope music, the mechanical clash of the rides, screams, and laughter. Kids, young couples, and older people too wandered along the sawdust path, all seemingly enjoying themselves. Kyle had thought carnivals were a thing of the past, replaced by high-tech theme parks, but apparently in the Midwest they lived on. This one seemed to be doing well despite the general air of tackiness. The rides creaked, the food smelled of old grease, and the stuffed animal prizes looked recycled. Still, something about the music, the smell of sawdust and cotton candy, the squeals of the kids on the Octopus kindled his enthusiasm.

"You want to go on a ride or anything?" he asked.

Marianne smiled mischievously. "I thought you weren't into carnivals."

"As long as we're here …"

"Thanks, but I don't want to get my skirt dirty," she said. "Let's go to the dance."

To Kyle's surprise, he had a pang of disappointment. He looked around the grounds. "Where are they holding it?"

"In the armory over on the other side of the parking lot." She looked up at the opaque sky. "We better get over there before it starts to rain."

They headed back the way they had come. Kyle took in the colorful game stands, the tents with their garish posters promising wonders inside, the rides with their shrieking passengers getting a few minutes of simulated danger. Suddenly he stopped. A frail, dark-haired boy was staring at him in front of one of the tents.

"What is it?" Marianne asked.

"Isn't that the Gypsy kid from the other day? The one who was getting pounded on?"

As he spoke, a tall, mahogany-skinned man came out of the tent. He was over six feet, lean as a flagpole, with sunken eyes that

burned with hidden secrets. The boy looked up at the man and said something to him.

Holding Marianne's hand, Kyle started toward the tent. The man looked at him, and for the instant their eyes met Kyle felt something like an electrical shock. Then the man grasped the boy by the hand and pulled him back through the flap into the tent. A canvas sign stretched on a frame read: *The Mysterious Dorando*.

Kyle stopped. "They're not real friendly."

"Gypsies," Marianne said. "They don't much mix with the people who live around here."

Kyle shrugged and they continued back out through the entrance arch. They made their way across the unlighted parking lot. Thunder boomed directly overhead.

"It's going to rain, isn't it," Kyle said.

"Probably. You're not afraid of a little water, are you?"

"I'm from California, remember. Out there it rains twice a year. In February. Everybody stays indoors and prays to the sun god."

"Be brave," she said, and squeezed his hand.

On the far side of the parking lot they approached a sprawling masonry building. Light spilled out through the windows and open doorway. Amplified music and laughing voices could be heard some distance away.

Inside the gray stone walls were hung with streamers, and enough colored lights had been installed to soften the interior of the armory to something resembling a ballroom. The floor was crowded with enthusiastic young dancers, while young men in pairs roamed among the stag girls who pretended to ignore them. The musicians played on a raised stage at one side of the floor. On the other a temporary bar had been erected and was doing heavy business.

It turned out the band wasn't half bad. True, they were playing stuff that had been on the charts a year ago or more, and their style was copied after half-a-dozen better bands, but they had a live

drummer who could keep the beat, and the girl singer who doubled on keyboard could have played for anybody.

"Shall we try it?" Kyle said.

"That's what we came for." Marianne took his hand and they made their way out onto the floor.

Marianne was an excellent dancer, responsive to Kyle's moves, and inventive on her own. It pleased him that she drew envious stares from many of the young men. A few of the dancers came up to speak to her between songs, glancing at Kyle curiously. She introduced him as Carney's cousin from California, and that seemed to satisfy them.

At intermission Marianne pulled out the neck of her blouse, fanning her breasts. Kyle looked toward the bar at the far side of the dance floor.

"Feel like a beer or something?"

"I'd really like a Seven-Seven."

He looked at her quickly. "Are you old enough?"

"I am in this state. Worried?"

"Not me. I'm old enough in any state."

He had her figured for Cherry Coke, and started feeling better about his chances of scoring tonight. He had planned on having a beer, but that would look wimpy now.

"Seven-Seven and a scotch and water," he told the bartender. The man brought their drinks without even a glance at Marianne. The drinking age must not be too big a deal in Wisconsin, Kyle thought.

They danced some more and had another drink, then the band broke for another intermission.

"Want to take a walk?" Kyle said. "Get some air?" He was feeling the drinks, and thought she must be too.

Marianne peered at him through lowered lashes. "Sure, why not?"

The night had grown colder. The dark sky seemed to press down on them. Lightning crackled overhead, followed immediately by the boom of thunder.

"Here comes the rain," Marianne said.

No sooner had she spoken that the first fat drops splattered the tromped-down dirt of the parking lot. Kyle took her hand and they dashed for the car as the rain began to fall in earnest.

Kyle fumbled the passenger side door open and Marianne scooted into the Plymouth. She had the other door open for him by the time he'd run around the front of the car. He slammed the door as the rain hammered the roof and ran in sheets down the windshield.

"How long does this usually last?" he said.

"Hard to guess. Maybe five minutes, maybe all night."

Now or never, he thought, and reached across her to pull the pint of vodka from the glove box.

"Like something to take the chill off?"

"I don't need it. Do you?"

Kyle shoved the bottle back into the glove box. He put an arm around Marianne and drew her toward him. She came with no resistance. He kissed her mouth, finding her lips incredibly soft and sweet tasting. He slid a hand down the curve of her back to her hip. She moved willingly under his touch.

Say what you want about these boring family sedans, the old bench seat had its advantages.

Several minutes later she eased away from him for a moment. The rain had stopped, but neither of them noticed. Both were breathing hard.

"You know you're going to have to stop before this goes too far," she said.

"Why?"

"Because you are, that's all. Maybe I'm not Mary Pop-pins, but

I'm not a slut either."

"I know you're not," he said and slid his hand up under her dress to the moist nylon of her crotch.

She let him stay there for a precious second, then grasped his wrist and firmly removed the hand. "So nothing is going to happen tonight. I just want you to know that now so you won't be moaning and groaning all the way home."

"Whatever you say."

He lowered his head and tasted the salty sweetness in the crevice between her breasts. She moaned softly.

Bang! The door on his side burst open and a powerful hand gripped his collar, yanking him back away from the girl.

"What the hell — " A rock-hard fist hit him in the mouth and he tasted blood. A solid forearm clamped his Adam's apple in a choke hold making him gag.

As he was dragged backwards from the car the other door was yanked open. Marianne yelled.

Kyle hit the mud with his back. He tried to struggle upright and a boot thudded against the side of his head. He fell back with pinpoints of colored lights whirling behind his eyes. He blinked rapidly. His vision cleared just long enough for him to see the acne-scarred face of Fabian Gerstner, the punk biker. The nose was still puffed from where Kyle had hit him, and the upper lip peeled back in a simian sneer. As Kyle tried to rise, somebody pulled him back by the hair. Fabian's motorcycle boot caught him in the ribs.

He rolled his head toward a whimpering sound. Marianne was being dragged across the ground toward a dark brown van. A barrel-shaped man in mechanic's coveralls had a huge hand clamped over her mouth.

This could not be happening. This was the Heartland. Norman Rockwell Smalltown, America, not the mean streets of downtown Los Angeles. Kyle scrambled to his knees and made a lunge toward

the man dragging Marianne. His head was snapped back again by whoever had a fistful of his hair. He rolled his eyes up to see a lean, mean face with glittery eyes and the sneering Gerstner mouth. Fabian kicked him again while the skinny one held him. Kyle could not suppress a grunt of pain.

“How do you like it, California Hotshit?” That from Fabian.

Another kick set the pin lights dancing again. Through patchy fog he watched helplessly as Marianne was dragged backwards away from him.

The boot clubbed the side of his head again. Kyle’s ears filled with a sound like rushing water. The rainy night went black.

FIVE

Lloyd Gerstner locked both of the girl's wrists in one of his powerful hands. He pulled her across the muddy ground in a series of cruel jerks toward the van. Marianne raised her head as he dragged her, enough to see the other two brothers kicking at Kyle as he lay curled on the ground. Every time he tried to rise they battered him down again. She screamed. Lloyd yanked her up by the wrists and hit her hard across the mouth.

"Shut up, bitch." The words were said calmly, almost patiently.

Marianne pulled in her breath in a shuddering sob. Lloyd continued to drag her towards the van as effortlessly as though she were stuffed with feathers. With her arms immobilized she started to thrash with her feet. All that accomplished was to dislodge her shoes and get her legs thoroughly muddied.

Jesse Gerstner watched with dry mouth as his brother reached the door of the van with his burden. He looked down at Kyle, senseless on the ground, and gave him a farewell kick in the ribs.

"Think you can handle surfer boy now?" he asked his brother.

Fabian gave him a scowl. "I can handle him any time I've got him in front of me."

"Good." Jesse trotted across the mud to the rear of the van. He seized Marianne's ankles, laughing at her struggles. With Lloyd swinging her by the wrists the two brothers tossed her like a sack of grain into the back of the van.

Her arm caught on a sharp protuberance that ripped a gash in the soft flesh of the underside. She hit the thin mattress on the floor with her tailbone and squealed in pain. Lloyd climbed in, looming huge in the doorway. Jesse followed.

“Any more noise, bitch, and I’m *really* gonna hit you,” Lloyd said.

“Let me go. You don’t want to do this.”

Lloyd drew back a meaty fist and smashed her in the face. “I warned you.”

The interior of the van darkened and blurred. Marianne blinked back the tears and saw him poised to punch her again. She choked off the scream.

“That’s better.” He traced a forefinger down her throat into the cleft between her breasts. “You’re not goin’ anywhere, so like the fella says, relax and enjoy it.”

She could not believe a man had actually said that. She vowed never to scoff at the militant feminists again. If she lived through this.

“Want me to go first?” Jesse said. “Warm her up for you?”

“Fuck no, I don’t want you to go first. I’m the big brother, remember? After I get mine, you’re next.”

“Sure, Lloyd, I just thought — ”

“Don’t think, just get in line.”

“It’s okay if I watch, isn’t it?”

“What do you think this is, a show? Go on out and help little brother keep the boyfriend quiet. I hear he didn’t do so good on his own.”

Jesse looked down at Marianne, licked his lips, and went out reluctantly. Lloyd pulled the door closed.

She stared back at him, trying not to show the icy fear that paralyzed her. “Don’t hurt me.” *God, what a stupid thing to say. Of course he’s going to hurt me*.

“Well, that pretty much depends on you, doesn’t it,” he said. “You be nice to me and I won’t hurt you. Is it a deal?”

Her hands crossed reflexively across her breasts. *Oh, you fat, dirty pig. Be nice? I’d kill you if I could. I’d really kill you*.

Lloyd grasped her wrist and easily pulled her arm away from her body. He squeezed her breast. “Don’t hide these babies, sweet thing. If you got ‘em, flash ‘em. Isn’t that what the kids say.”

Marianne could only whimper. She tasted her fear, cold and metallic, and hated herself for her weakness.

“You want to take the clothes off now?”

She stared at him, unable to move. *This can’t be happening to me. This happens to nameless women on dark dirty streets in Milwaukee or Chicago, not on the carnival grounds in Elkhorn City, Wisconsin. Not to Marianne Avery*.

Lloyd’s face darkened. “I ain’t got all night. Take ’em off or I’ll rip ’em off.”

I’ve got to get away. I can’t let this happen to me. Awkwardly she scrambled to her knees and lunged for the door handle. Lloyd caught her by the hair and yanked her back cruelly.

I won’t cry. I won’t. You can’t make me cry.

He slapped her with his hard palm, then with the back of his hand and grabbed a fistful of blouse at her throat. He jerked savagely at the material. Buttons popped off and rattled about the van.

“I’ll do it,” she said.

Lloyd rocked back and watched with glittery eyes as Marianne carefully removed the torn top and laid it aside. She hesitated. When Lloyd started to move toward her she reached back and unhooked her bra.

At least I can stop him from ruining my clothes. What a silly thing to worry about at a time like this. But what are my choices? Fight? No chance. He’s much too strong. Scream? That would just make him angry. And there’s no one to hear me, anyway. Try to talk him out of it? Oh, sure, big chance of that with an animal like Lloyd Gerstner. What was left? Submit. *“Relax and enjoy it.”* Oh, yes!

"Move, dammit. Get those fucking clothes off, bitch."

She laid her bra aside and unzipped the Ultrasuede skirt. She pushed it down her legs and over her feet.

Lloyd Gerstner licked his dry lips. "That's the ticket. Now the pantyhose."

She closed her eyes and bit the insides of her cheeks as she hooked her thumbs under the waistband and slid the pantyhose down and off. She could not get the cruel joke out of her mind. *Relax and enjoy it … enjoy it … enjoy it.*

Lloyd tossed his corduroy jacket aside. He unbuckled his pants, sat down to pull them off, keeping his eyes on Marianne. He peeled off the soiled white jockey shorts. In spite of herself, Marianne could not look away from his short, thick penis. He grasped the member in one hand and pulled her head toward him with the other.

"Kiss it, honey. Say hello to Junior."

Think of something else. Think of the last football game of the season between Bischoff and Clintonville.

She felt the rubbery head of his cock against her lips.

It hadn't been a good season for the Bisons and they were not expected to do much against the undefeated Clintonville team.

"That's the babe. Now let's see you suck it."

In the fourth quarter Bischoff was behind only 14-12. The Bisons had the ball at the Cougars' 20-yardline. The kids were going wild.

"Suck. Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh *yeah*! Junior loves it. Do it, honey."

The game was so exciting she and the other girls on the Pep Squad almost forgot to cheer. Red and white fight, fight, red and white fight, fight! Goooooooo Bisons!

"Okay, that's enough. Junior's ready for action."

The hateful thing was pulled from her mouth. The taste, salt

and something like ammonia, stayed. Her legs were pulled apart. Lloyd Gerstner's gross body dropped on top of hers. His fingers prodded between her legs. Then his thick, dripping penis pushed into her.

Oh, God the football game. Let me go back to the football game. Please. Oh, God he's in me and pumping, pumping. It hurts. I'm going to be sick. Oh, no, nooo, nooooo!

She felt the hot spurt of his sperm. He barked his pleasure and collapsed on top of her while his cock shrank back to its normal stubby size.

He's through. It's over, and I'm still alive. I'll get clean and I'll douche his stinking juice out of me. I'll forget about it in time. I'll be all right.

He pulled out of her and wiped himself with his shorts. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

She reached for her clothes. Standing bent over above her, Lloyd kicked them away from her into a corner of the van.

"Don't be in such a hurry. My brothers are out there waiting, remember?"

She tried to speak, but it came out in a long, wordless wail.

Keeping an eye on her, Lloyd opened the door of the van just far enough for him to call out.

"Hey, Jesse. She's ready for you."

Marianne fell back to the floor of the van. Darkness closed in as she sent her mind to someplace far away.

SIX

Time did not exist. He was in no place. There was only pain and rage and intermittent blackness. With his ribs on fire and his head pounding with each agonizing heartbeat Kyle eventually gave up any attempt to stand up and fight back. He lay passively on the wet ground, his arms pinned by one or more of his attackers, another always ready with a kick if he showed signs of resistance. He was dimly aware that they changed places from time to time. He heard the back door of the van open and close. Once he heard Marianne cry out. He slipped at last into a cold, empty cavern of his mind.

When feelings began to return, his first sensation was a bone rattling chill. Then the wetness of the ground underneath him. Then the pain. His head throbbed, his chest cramped with each breath. He retched and tasted vomit. The effort made his head hurt worse.

Slowly, carefully, he opened his eyes and looked around. And he remembered. The rain had diminished to a steady mist. The parking lot was a sea of mud. Only scattered cars were still there. The Plymouth stood where he had parked it, water beading on the wax job he had so carefully applied. The van and the three assailants were gone.

He rolled his head to one side and saw Marianne. She sat on the muddy ground with her back against the tree trunk, hugging her knees, looking straight ahead. Water dripped steadily from the leaves onto her huddled body. Marianne did not notice. Her strawberry hair was wet and limp, strands haphazardly pasted to her face. One cheek was scraped raw. Blood oozed from a deep cut on her forearm. The white blouse was torn, exposing one breast. The green skirt was bunched high on her legs. The insides of her

thighs were scraped raw.

Overcoming the pain throughout his body, Kyle levered himself to a sitting position. “Where are they?” His voice rasped.

“They’re gone. I thought they’d killed you.”

“What did they do to you?”

“What do you think?”

“Bastards! Were they who I think they were?”

Marianne nodded slowly. “The ones I told you about. The Gerstner brothers. You met Fabian. The big one’s Lloyd. The thin one’s Jesse.”

“Have you called the police?”

“No.”

“Well, let’s go do it.” He pushed himself to his feet, testing his ribs with careful fingertips. Painful, but not broken.

Marianne did not move. “It wouldn’t do any good.”

“What?”

“Calling the police.”

“Are you crazy? They raped you.”

“They’re the Gerstners. They do what they want.”

“Marianne, listen to me. There are laws. They can put those assholes away for a long time.”

“Maybe, and maybe not. Even if they did, do you know who the real loser would be? Me. What do you think my life would be like from now on? All I want is to live in my home town, get married, and be happy. If people find out what I did they’ll never think of me without thinking *dirty*.”

“What *you* did?! Jesus, Marianne, you’re the victim here. Nobody can put any blame on you.”

“Oh, no? Look at me.” She squirmed around to face him, held her arms wide and spread her legs, showing him her assaulted womanhood. “Look at this and tell me you still want me. Tell me I’m not unclean.”

“That’s foolish,” he said, but his voice lacked conviction. In his heart he knew he could never feel comfortable with the girl again, knowing she had been used by those pigs. It was unfair. It was unjust. But it was true.

“See what I mean,” she said, as though she had read his thoughts. “You can go back to California and forget all about tonight. I have to live in my town.”

“But those … those Gerstners will be walking around free.”

“They live here in Elkhorn City. They don’t come into Bischoff much. When they do I can stay out of their way.” Awkwardly she rose to her feet. “Take me home now. I’ll have to sneak into the house and get cleaned up before my parents see me.”

“Jesus, Marianne, this is wrong.” Underneath his rage at the Gerstner brothers and his compassion for Marianne grew another, even more powerful emotion. Shame. Shame for the girl, and shame for himself that he had failed to protect her. Rationally he knew that he had no chance, taken by surprise as he was, against the three of them. But he should have done something. And he did not. He searched Marianne’s face for some hint of reproach, but her expression told him nothing. In time, he was sure, she would come to blame him and hate him for what he had failed to do.

“Just take me home,” she said.

“If that’s what you want. Let’s go.”

Marianne ignored his offered hand and walked shakily to the car. She got in without assistance. He climbed into the driver’s seat, the pain of his beating overridden by rage and humiliation. He buckled the seat belt and fired the engine. The rain picked up again. With the windshield wipers smacking the water aside, he drove out of the parking lot.

The Ferris wheel and the Octopus were dark. The carnival stands were closed and shuttered. The music and lights were long gone from the armory. The carnival was ended. Kyle found the road

out of town and headed for Bischoff. Neither he nor Marianne spoke. There was nothing to be said.

The rain came back in heavy bursts, alternating with periods of light drizzle. The windshield wipers left curving streaks where the aging rubber blades failed to clear the glass. A rising wind whipped the trees that crowded the highway into a frenzied dance.

Kyle's thoughts were black. His manhood cried out for revenge, but his brain told him it was foolish. He was in the Gerstner's home territory, any attempt to get even could only cost him. To his chagrin, what he wanted most right now was to get this girl home, drop her off, and escape. Tonight's terror would haunt him for a while, and the bruises would hurt, but he was young and resilient. He would get over it and get on with his life once he was far away from Marianne.

"Look out!"

Her cry startled him. They were the first words she had spoken since they left the parking lot in Elkhorn City. He looked at her in alarm, saw her staring straight ahead. He looked back to see a wind-fallen tree across the road. Reflexively he stomped the brake pedal. The brakes grabbed, the car slewed sideways on the wet pavement, teetered and rolled.

The Wisconsin countryside turned upside down. A rush of wind blasted through the car as both doors flew open. Screeching metal, breaking glass. A shower of small loose objects tumbled about the interior of the car. Rightside up again, bouncing on the springs, a last forward lunge and the nose of the car dipped into the roadside ditch, stopping short of the rivulet of rainwater in the bottom. Remarkably the headlights were still on, beaming down into the water. The right-hand door swung wide. The passenger seat was empty.

The engine labored and died. Instinctively Kyle reached down and turned off the ignition. Windows were spidered on both sides,

but the safety glass had not shattered. The roof was caved in above his head.

Moving gingerly, Kyle unlocked the seat belt at his waist. Had Marianne buckled hers? He could not remember. He ran a hand over his body. He hurt in a dozen places, but he was hurting before the crash. Carefully he tried moving his arms and legs. All his limbs responded. No sudden sharp pains meant no broken bones. His lucky night. He shoved past the partly open door and got out.

The night was black as his mood, with the only illumination a reflection from the Plymouth's headlights. The rain had stopped for the moment. The silence of the night was broken only by the steady rustle from the dripping roadside trees. It took him a moment to get his bearings, then he saw Marianne. She lay on her back near the center of the road next to the fallen tree.

He ran to her side and knelt. "Marianne!"

No response.

He could see no obvious bruises other than the cut on her forearm she had sustained during the attack by the brothers. What bothered him, what squeezed his heart in a cold fist, was that her head lay canted at an impossible angle. Impossible for a living person.

He seized her wrist, scrabbled with his fingers for a pulse, felt nothing. He put his ear to the soft, damp flesh above the neckline of her blouse. He held his breath and listened, praying for a heartbeat.

Silence.

"Oh, Jesus, no! No! No! *No!"*

The silent dripping night mocked his cry.

Kyle stumbled to his feet. He pulled off his jacket and lay it over the motionless girl, pulling it up to her chin. Even as he did so he thought what a foolish, futile gesture it was.

He ran back to the car. As far as he could tell it was still driveable. Should he try to put Marianne inside? Could he do

further damage by moving her? Should he leave her here and drive for help? His head ached with confusion and indecision. He ran back to the center of the road and looked back the way they had come and forward beyond the fallen tree. Darkness.

Then, suddenly, headlights from the direction of Elkhorn City appeared through the mist half a mile away. Kyle stood over Marianne's body, in front of the fallen tree, wigwagging his arms. The headlights came to a stop ten feet away. Kyle shaded his eyes and saw that the vehicle was a battered old pickup with a camper shell riding slightly askew on the bed. The driver's door opened and closed. A tall, very thin man walked around and into the glare of the lights. The silhouette was somehow familiar.

"Do you need help?"

"The girl … we've got to get her to a hospital?" *The* girl, not *my* girl. Even in his near panic Kyle recognized the subtle distancing of himself from Marianne. He also recognized the absurdity. No hospital was going to help her. Not now, not ever.

The tall stranger confirmed this. He knelt by Marianne, touched her face, and looked up solemnly. Kyle caught a blast of garlic as the man spoke.

"The girl is dead."

"Oh, Jesus." Kyle buried his face in his hands. He wanted to cry, but the sob caught in his throat. He took his hands away and looked at the man who now stood directly in front of him. Then he remembered. Just hours earlier he had seen him in front of a tent at the cheap carnival. *The Mysterious Dorando*.

"You fought for my son when no one else would help. I owe you. Tell me what you would have."

Kyle gave a bitter, coughing laugh. "What I would have? I'd have this girl get up and walk and talk again. Can you handle that?"

"Is this truly what you want? Think carefully."

Kyle stared at the somber Gypsy. "Hey, I wasn't serious."

“I am.”

“Are you some kind of a doctor?”

“I am not a doctor. I have certain … powers.”

“Are you saying you can … you can bring her back?”

“If that is what you desire.”

Hysteria bubbled up in Kyle. “Yeah, sure, go ahead. What the hell have I got to lose. Sure. Bring her back!”

The Gypsy was silent for a long moment. His eyes were pinpoints of light in their deep sockets. He said, “Help me carry her to my truck.”

Dorando locked his arms around Marianne below her breasts. Kyle grasped her bare ankles. They lifted the girl from the blacktop pavement. Kyle shuddered at the cold, rubbery feeling of her flesh. Together they carried the limp burden to the rear of the camper. Dorando braced Marianne against his body and levered open the back door. Awkwardly they carried her inside. From the cab the gypsy boy watched silently.

There was not enough vertical room to stand erect. Hunched over, Kyle and the Gypsy lay Marianne on her back on a narrow pallet bolted to one wall. Dorando snapped on a battery powered overhead light. To Kyle the interior looked like a hopeless jumble of trash. Bottles, tins, paper bags, scraps of material, stale smelling clothing was scattered about with no apparent attempt at order. A deck of cards was spread out on a folding metal tray as though a game had been interrupted.

The Gypsy took Marianne’s chin in a lean brown hand and turned her face toward him. He thumbed open an eyelid. The eyeball had a dull sheen and an unfocused look. Dorando said something Kyle did not catch, and nodded to himself. Then the Gypsy turned to face him.

“I ask you once more. Do you truly want this?”

“Do I want her alive? Hell yes. If there’s anything you can do,

please, *please* do it."

"So be it. You wait outside. I don't think you want to watch."

Kyle started to protest, but changed his mind. The smell of the Gypsy and his camper were making him a little sick. He went outside and closed the door behind him.

Out in the cold wet night Kyle wondered what the hell he was doing. The hysteria drained out of him and he sat down weakly on the rear bumper of the camper. It was the worst night of his life. And it had all started with such promise. A date with the beautiful Marianne, Homecoming Queen, intended bride of his cousin. The dance, the drinks, the heavy breathing session back in the car. Then the world ended. The Gerstner brothers, pain, rape, the drive home, skidding, flipping, crashing in the ditch. Marianne dead in the road. How could there be a night worse than this one?

He began framing his explanations and his apologies. The accident really wasn't his fault. It was the weather and the road condition. As for what happened to Marianne, maybe they wouldn't examine the body closely enough to find she'd been raped. No, that was wishful thinking. He'd have to tell the whole story from the start, and damn the Gerstner brothers. It would make him look bad, first for not stopping the rape — nothing he could have done, but who would believe that — then for not reporting it. But who would worry about that, considering the girl was dead.

For sure he was going to have an unpleasant time of it, but it wouldn't last forever. A month at most, and he could be out of here, back in the California sunshine with his buddies and the foxy beach girls. His parents would have to be told, but nobody else back home needed to know about this wretched night. Back to school in the fall and forget this detestable summer. God, how he wished he could fast-forward his life just that far.

The camper door opened, startling him. Dorando stood silhouetted in the pale light from inside.

“You can come in now,” the Gypsy said.

Kyle stood, grunting from the pain in his ribs, and climbed into the camper. An icy finger of dread probed at his insides.

SEVEN

Kyle followed the tall man up into the camper. His nose switched at the acrid smell, something like scorched vinegar. A veil of smoke hung in layers under the weak light from the battery lamp. With no ventilation inside it was hard to breathe.

Dorando the Gypsy backed away and gave him room to approach Marianne, who lay where he had left her, eyes closed, hands down at her sides. The cut on her arm was open but not bleeding. The skin of her face was pale, her expression composed. A thread of dark liquid trickled from a corner of her mouth. Kyle looked up at the Gypsy.

"What? What am I supposed to see?"

"Look."

As Kyle turned back to the girl her body gave a convulsive jerk, as though an electric shock had gone through her. He jumped back, banging his head on the overhead panel.

"Ouch! Jesus!"

Marianne sat up suddenly, jerkily, as though a spring had been activated in her back. Her eyes popped open and blinked.

"Look out, that tree — " she began, then gasped and looked around her. "Where are we? What happened?"

Kyle turned to the Gypsy in open-mouthed disbelief. "You … you did it!"

"It is what you asked of me."

"Will somebody tell me what's going on?" Marianne said.

In an agony of relief Kyle fell to his knees beside her. "We had an accident. You were out, unconscious, I guess. Jesus, I thought you were … were …"

“Dead?”

“You sure looked like it. I couldn’t get any pulse. You didn’t seem to be breathing.”

“Well I feel fine. Where are we?” She looked past him at the Gypsy. “Who’s that?”

“His name is Dorando.” Kyle turned to the dark man for confirmation, but got no reply. “He helped us. He revived you.”

He turned again to the Gypsy, who watched impassively. “How did you — ”

He broke off as Marianne coughed and swung her feet to the floor. “Can we get out of here?” she said. “I can’t stand the smell.”

“Sure. I-I think the car will still drive. There’s a tree across the road.”

“Well, let’s move the tree and get going.”

“It’s a good size tree.”

“Let’s try, okay?” Her voice was tinged with annoyance.

Moving apparently without pain, Marianne stepped out the back of the camper and down to the road. Kyle and the Gypsy followed her. While Marianne walked briskly to the fallen tree Kyle turned to the dark man.

“Listen, I don’t know how I can thank you — ”

“Don’t. My debt to you is not fully paid.”

“But — ”

“Goodbye.”

Before Kyle could say more the Gypsy walked to the cab of his truck and climbed in. He started the engine, jockeyed it around in the road, and drove back toward Elkhorn City. Kyle looked after him. A nibble of apprehension started around the nape of his neck.

Marianne was tugging at a branch of the fallen tree, dragging it a few inches at a time to the side of the road. “Are you going to help, or do I have to do this by myself?”

Kyle shook away the cobwebs and walked over to join her.

With both of them pulling, it was surprisingly easy to drag the heavy tree far enough to one side to allow the passage of the car.

Marianne climbed into the passenger seat, and by throwing his weight against her door Kyle managed to close it. Kyle got in on the other side and keyed the ignition. The starter growled tiredly, drained by the headlights, but the engine caught at last. He backed up and out of the ditch, cranked the wheel, and maneuvered past the fallen tree. The car wanted to pull to the right, but otherwise ran without trouble.

With time at last to collect his thoughts, Kyle had to believe he had gotten off a lot luckier tonight than he had any right to expect. In the back of his mind had been a possible charge of manslaughter. Uncle Bob would not be happy about the damage to the car, but he could handle that.

"You're quiet," Marianne said.

"I'm still in a little bit of shock. It'll take me a while to get over tonight."

"Let's don't let it spoil everything, okay?"

Kyle glanced over at her. In the soft glow from the instrument panel her face was animated, her eyes bright. A remarkable recovery for a girl who had been dragged into a van, thrice raped, rolled in a car and knocked senseless, and revived less than an hour ago by a sinister looking Gypsy.

He said, "I'm just glad it wasn't worse."

"It's over," she said. "Let's forget about it."

"If you can, I guess I can."

She moved over closer to him and lay her head on his shoulder. Her hair retained a faint burnt vinegar smell and she had not wiped the dark trickle, now dried, from the corner of her mouth.

"Maybe you ought to buckle up," he said.

"A little late for that, isn't it?"

Was there, he wondered, an implied accusation in her

comment?

"Besides, this way I can sit closer to you."

She touched the back of his neck, making him shudder.

"My, aren't we jumpy."

He forced a laugh. "Ticklish."

"I wonder where else you're ticklish."

The teasing banter seemed jarringly out of place after the dark events of the evening, and he was glad to roll past the dark Standard station that marked the edge of Bischoff. He found Marianne's street and slowed down the limping Plymouth as they neared her house.

"Park up there at the end," she said. "By the fence under the last elm tree."

"What for?"

"I'm going to sneak in the back way and I don't want Daddy waking up with a car out front." She peered up at him through matted bangs. "Besides, I want to talk to you."

Reluctantly, Kyle drove on as directed. He desperately wanted to get this girl out of the car and get back to his own clean bed.

He stopped under the elm. Marianne reached over and punched off the headlights.

"I'd better keep the motor running," he said. "It might not start again."

"My motor's running," she said, and reached into his crotch.

Kyle jerked back against the seat as the girl took hold of his limp penis.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it feel like? This is what you've been wanting all night, isn't it? What's the matter, you chickening out?"

"Jesus, Marianne, you can't expect me to be in the mood now. Not after everything that happened tonight."

She unzipped his fly and reached inside to squeeze him through

the thin material of his briefs. “I’ll bet I can put you in the mood.”

“Stop it.” He grasped her wrist and pulled her hand away.

She looked at him coquettishly from under her matted red bangs. “What’s the matter, Mr. California Stud? A little Wisconsin girl too much for you?”

“Cut it out.”

“You’re not a fag, are you?”

“No. And I’m not a sex freak either. I got beat up tonight, watched you get raped, rolled my uncle’s car, and thought for a minute I’d killed you. No way I’m going to get it up after all that. All I want to do is go to bed. Why don’t you go on in the house.”

Marianne smiled at him. She leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth. Her lips were caked with grit and blood. Her breath was sour. She said, “Nighty-night, lover. I’ll be talking to you.”

Not if I can help it, Kyle thought. He reached across to shove open the passenger door and Marianne got out. Then he turned the battered Plymouth around and headed toward Uncle Bob’s farm without looking back at the girl.

She had to be in shock, he decided. Some kind of hysteria. Maybe that could make the cheerleader act like a slut. Maybe the accident brought out all the emotions she had repressed as Homecoming Queen and all that shit. Maybe … ah, the hell with it. He had his own problems. First and foremost was explaining to Uncle Bob about the car. He began rehearsing how he would tell his parents, since they would have to help him pay for it. Christ, was this a rotten summer or what?

He felt a chill and reached down to find he had forgotten to zip up his fly. Could that crazy female really have expected him to perform after tonight? Right now he doubted he would ever have the urge again. Celibacy sounded like a hell of a good idea. Well, at least for the rest of the summer.

He turned up the road leading to Uncle Bob’s farmhouse. There

was a light in the kitchen window. He shuddered.

EIGHT

Explaining about the car turned out to be not the ordeal Kyle had feared. Uncle Bob was awake in his room when Kyle came in, and listened calmly to a somewhat modified story of the accident. Kyle omitted the strange business with the Gypsy and, naturally, the rape scene in the parking lot. He would deal with that if and when he had to. Nothing would be served by adding it to his present problem.

When his uncle had been assured that neither of the young couple was seriously hurt, he told Kyle they would work out something on the car. To Kyle's vast relief, his uncle saw no reason why his parents had to be brought into it.

In the days that followed Kyle threw himself eagerly into the work around the farm. He mucked out the cow barn, serviced the feeders, gathered eggs from the hen house, spread manure, and pestered Amos Deerfoot to show him how to run the tractor mower.

The Indian watched uneasily as Kyle took over sole care of the vegetable garden. He sprayed insecticide, tended the young plants, picked the fattest tomatoes and leafiest lettuce, and yanked out weeds with a joyful anger. He even took to helping Mrs. Simms around the house. By nightfall he was exhausted, but his mind was clear, his muscles were alive, and he was feeling better than he had in a long time.

Ernie Laudermilk down at the Standard Station did what he could for the Caravelle. He pounded out the dents in the side panels and the roof, fixed the doors so they closed fairly well, and replaced the broken glass. The car still crabwalked and wanted to pull to the right, but it was serviceable for driving from the farm into town and

back. Ernie's bill was a fraction of what an L.A. body shop would have charged, and Kyle worked out a program with his uncle whereby he would work it off around the farm. Grateful for the kind treatment from the fates, Kyle renewed his efforts.

Uncle Bob's health was improving too. One morning he felt like coming down to the kitchen for breakfast, and Kyle gladly helped him negotiate the stairs. Seeing the improvement in his uncle, Kyle began planning his escape to California. He was feeling great as he shoveled in the bacon and hotcakes Mrs. Simms had prepared. Then the real world returned with a jolt.

"Seems funny Marianne hasn't been around," his uncle said. "You two didn't have a scrap or something?"

"No," Kyle said, feeling a knot in his stomach. He had managed to avoid thinking about the girl since dropping her off that night. Having heard nothing, he assumed she had not told her parents about the sordid evening. "Everything was cool."

"It's not like her to stay away. You're sure she wasn't hurt in the accident?"

"She had a little cut on her arm. It didn't amount to much. She seemed fine when I took her home."

"You heard anything, Mrs. Simms?"

"Nope." The housekeeper's eyes snapped over at Kyle. He looked away quickly.

"Maybe you ought to ring her up, Kyle. Make sure she's all right."

"Yeah, I can do that."

Uncle Bob's therapist came and they went back up to his bedroom. Kyle helped Mrs. Simms clear away the breakfast dishes. He watched her out of the corner of his eye, waiting for her to say something. When she did not speak he could hold it in no longer.

"Mrs. Simms, *have* you heard anything?"

"Heard anything?"

“About Marianne.”

“Nothing I’d want to repeat in front of your uncle.”

“Well, what *is* it?”

“I didn’t know you were interested in town gossip.”

“Mrs. Simms — ”

“People say she’s been acting peculiar. Not like herself.”

“How peculiar? In what way?”

“Sure you want to hear this?”

Kyle’s throat tightened. He put down the stack of dishes he was carrying and stared at her.

“All right, if you got to know. For one thing, she hasn’t been back to work in the New Emporium since that night.”

“Maybe she’s just taking some time off.”

“Maybe. But there’s other things.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t like to listen to gossip, you understand, but people say she’s been fooling around.”

“Fooling around?”

“Aren’t I talking clear? Fooling around. Like hanging out with that bunch of bums at the Happy Otto. I wouldn’t repeat some of the stories about what she’s been doing. Not that I believe them. But people love to talk. Some have her even mixing in with the Indians.”

Mrs. Simms looked ready to amplify on the rumors, but Kyle had already heard more than he wanted. He left the kitchen and hurried out to the tool shed. There he got busy sharpening axes that did not need it. He remembered Marianne’s odd behavior in the car as they parked down the street from her house. Could the accident have done something to her brain? He recalled the bizarre story of a woman who had sued the city of San Francisco, claiming a cable car accident had turned her into a nymphomaniac. His good mood of recent days evaporated.

Two days later Marianne showed up in person. The sun was hot and Kyle had his shirt off. He was splitting wood to dry out for fireplace kindling, enjoying the pull of his muscles as he swung the axe. There was a sensual pleasure in seeing the chunks of wood part cleanly under the blade and topple to either side of the chopping block. He froze as a hand fell on his shoulder. Slowly he lowered the axe.

"Hi, lover."

He returned reluctantly to see Marianne smiling at him. But it was a different smile and a different Marianne. A soiled T-shirt bore the logo of Bischoff High School. Her jeans were tight enough to squeak. Her strawberry hair was carelessly combed with straggling strands falling haphazardly. She wore dark eye makeup, and her lipstick was crooked.

"Glad to see me?"

"Oh, hi. Sure."

"I was waiting for you to call."

"Yeah, well, I was going to, but there was a lot of stuff to do around here."

"You're becoming quite the farmer."

He forced a small laugh. "So … how are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Can't you see?" She did a clumsy pirouette in front of him. He caught a whiff of heavy sweet perfume.

A bandage patched the forearm where she had been cut. The gauze was stained a dark yellow. Kyle pointed to it, being careful not to touch her.

"How's your arm?"

"It's nothing much. Want to see?" She started to pick at the bandage.

"No," he said quickly. He looked off toward the house. "Uncle Bob will be glad to see you."

"I didn't come to see your uncle."

“Well, he was asking about you.”

She put out a hand and stroked Kyle’s bare chest. He had to force himself not to flinch from her touch.

“I came to see you. You’re getting a nice tan.”

“Uh, thanks. You really ought to go up and talk to Uncle Bob. I know he’d like that.”

“Fuck Uncle Bob.” She giggled. “Better yet, fuck you. That’s what I came for, you know.”

“Jesus, Marianne, what’s with you?”

“I’m horny. Aren’t girls allowed to get horny?”

“Why do you want to talk that way?”

“Hey, haven’t you heard the words before? What do they say for fucking in California? Or don’t they fuck out there? Just suck cocks? I can do that too.”

He glanced nervously toward the open kitchen window. “Mrs. Simms might hear you.”

“What’s the matter, don’t you think she’s ever done it? She had a couple of kids, you know. Where do you think they came from, immaculate conception?”

“Cut it out.”

Marianne’s overbright smile crumbled into little pieces. “Don’t tell me to cut it out, Mr. California Stud. If you don’t like what you see, just remember you did it. You owe me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I didn’t tell Daddy half the things that happened Saturday night. I didn’t tell him how you tried to get in my pants, then sat by and let those three bastard Gerstners rape me.”

“Sat by?! Wait a minute — ”

“*You* wait a minute. You let those animals rape me and you didn’t even report it.”

“You’re the one who didn’t want to — ”

“Shut up. Then you wreck the car and while I’m unconscious or

something you and that Gypsy do dirty things to me in his smelly old camper. You're damn lucky I didn't tell, or you'd be in a whole lot of trouble."

Something cold clutched his insides as he began to understand the power this girl had over him. Working to keep his voice calm he said, "Hey, there's no need to get all frosty with me. We had a bad night, but we came out of it pretty lucky, all things considered. Let's call it even and be friends, okay?"

Her expression did not soften. "No, not okay. You owe me, Kyle. I'm horny, I told you, and I want you to do something about it. Now."

"Be reasonable, Marianne. A man can't just perform on demand, you know."

"We'll see about that. Come on."

She seized his wrist and started to pull him away from the woodpile. Her grip was uncommonly strong. Kyle held back. He opened his mouth to protest.

Marianne put her face close to his. "Or do you want me to tell my father and your uncle and everybody else in town what you did to me?"

"I didn't do anything to you, and we both know it."

"The way I'll tell it, you did. And in this town, who do you think people will believe, you or me?"

He turned his head to avoid her sour breath. He was beaten and he knew it. If he let her try whatever she had in mind maybe she would go away and forget him. He relaxed and let her lead him toward the out buildings.

"Did you ever do it in a barn?" she said.

"Amos is in there."

"Maybe he'd like to watch. Or even join in. But maybe you're not ready for that. Let's go in the tool shed."

With a last glance back toward the house, Kyle let himself be

pulled along toward the tool shed. It was a rectangular unpainted wooden building with a corrugated roof. Inside it smelled of machine oil and sawdust.

"This will do," she said. "Let's see what we've got to work with."

Kyle recoiled as she went for his crotch.

"Don't jump, lover. I'm not going to hurt you."

"I tell you there's no way I can do anything."

"We'll see. Why don't you relax and enjoy it."

Feeling as though he was in some kind of nightmare, Kyle let her push him to the gritty floor of the shed. She undid his belt, opened his pants, and yanked them down to his knees, taking his briefs along. With one hand she milked his limp penis while her other fondled his testicles.

"You like that?" She smiled down at him, her lipsticked mouth garish in the dim light that filtered through the shed's single window.

Kyle grunted. Incredibly, he started to get hard. The last thing in the world he wanted was to have sex with this suddenly weird girl. And yet, he could not deny it, she was exciting him. And she knew it.

"What did I tell you? You're more of a man than you thought."

She dipped her head suddenly and nibbled at the head of his cock. A shudder ripped through his body. He lay propped on his elbows as Marianne stood up skinned down her jeans. She wore no underwear. She pulled the jeans off one foot, then the other, balancing precariously as she did so. Naked from the waist down, she stood over him for a moment rubbing herself between the thighs.

"Ready to fill this hole for me? Yes, I can see you are."

Kyle started to get up. She pushed him back down.

"You stay right there, lover. Let me do the work."

She squatted over him, lowering the lips of her vagina over his rigid penis. She dropped suddenly, swallowing him, and began to ride.

There was not much lubrication, and the friction of her pumping chafed the tender skin of his penis. Yet, hating himself for it, Kyle responded, rising to meet her with a flat smack of flesh on each plunge. Marianne threw her head around wildly, the loose hair slashing across her face.

Finally he could hold back no more. He let himself go and spurted inside her. Marianne rode all the harder, whimpering in her need. When his erection collapsed and she could no longer hold him inside she toppled over with a moan and lay beside him.

"That's all right, lover. We'll do better next time."

Next time?! All he could think about was that he wanted to be away from this girl. And he wanted a bath. He felt dirtier than he ever had in his entire life.

She reached down and squeezed his limp member. "At least you had a good time. Didn't I tell you?"

He rolled away from her touch. As he did so, the bandage on her forearm pulled free. Kyle stared at the still open wound. The raw edges of skin were crusted with a lichen like white growth. The grayish meat underneath oozed a viscous green liquid.

"Hey, that doesn't look good," he said.

"Don't worry about it, lover."

Kyle looked up into her face. As he did so he was aware of a faintly unpleasant odor under the heavy perfume. It triggered a childhood memory of a vacant house where he had played sometimes as a child, a house where a sick old dog had crawled under the floorboards and died. His mouth dropped open as he recognized the smell. It was rot.

NINE

“Marianne, what’s wrong with you?” Kyle’s throat tightened, squeezing his voice out in a tremulous whisper.

Marianne looked him straight in the eye. She smiled slowly and let her head fall to one side, at the angle it had lain that night in the road outside Elkhorn City.

“Don’t you know what’s wrong with me, Kyle? You should. You did it to me. You made me what I am. You and that Gypsy. Isn’t this what you wanted?”

“That’s crazy. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He pulled up his pants.

She opened her mouth to speak.

He put a hand over her lips. “I don’t want to hear any more. Go home, Marianne. Go home and take a bath.”

She got to her feet, looking not quite steady. “If you say so, lover. I can see you’re all through for now, anyway.”

She found her jeans and pulled them on. Kyle turned away so he would not have to watch her. When she was dressed Marianne pushed open the door of the tool shed.

“Bye,” she said. “For now.”

Kyle hastily closed his fly and stood in the doorway. He watched Marianne walk to the little red Mustang in a peculiar gait that made her look like her joints were a little too loose.

She turned when she reached the car and waved at him, the unhealed wound a dark smear on the pale flesh of her arm. “See you soon,” she called.

The implied threat in her words froze his heart. He turned away and stumbled back toward the house.

Mrs. Simms was in the kitchen as he came in through the back door. She stood at the counter chopping at something with a chef's knife. She did not look around.

"How's Marianne?"

"She's fine," he said, ignoring the insinuation in the woman's tone, and hurried through the kitchen and upstairs to his room.

He stripped off his clothes, wrapped a towel around his waist, and padded across the hall to the bathroom. There he got under a steaming shower and scrubbed at his skin until it was pink, trying to obliterate any memory of the act in the tool shed. When the flesh of his entire body tingled, he switched the shower to *Cold* and stayed under it until his teeth chattered.

When at last he came out he felt a little better. At least he could no longer smell Marianne on himself. He bundled up the clothes he had worn and stuffed them into the wicker laundry hamper.

He declined supper that night, pleading a touch of the flu, and went to bed. He pulled the sheet and hand-stitched quilt up to his chin, and lay shivering despite the warmth of the June evening. All the scrubbing in the shower had not erased the mental picture of the scene in the tool shed, nor cleansed his nose of the odor of rot. He lay curled into the fetal position until far into the night before he slept.

The next day Kyle stayed in his room with the window shade pulled all the way down. He kept seeing Marianne's loose-lipped smile and hearing her parting words. *"See you soon."* He was reluctant to open the door for fear she would be standing there grinning at him, loose limbed, head askew. Stinking.

"Oh, Jesus," he said aloud, "how did I get into this."

At sundown Mrs. Simms rapped once and opened his door. "You feel like eating something?"

"I'm not very hungry."

“You’ll feel better if you eat.”

Okay, might as well admit it, he *was* hungry. And he couldn’t hide under the covers forever.

“I’ll be down soon as I wash up.”

Mrs. Simms had prepared a supper of creamy chicken fricassee, mountains of mashed potatoes with cream gravy and green garden peas. Kyle ate with an appetite that surprised him. Dessert was German chocolate cake with caramel frosting. He was about to take the first bite when an automobile horn sounded outside.

Kyle jumped up from the table and made it to the door before Mrs. Simms. The horn honked again.

Mrs. Simms peered past him. “That looks like Marianne’s car.”

“I’ll go see,” Kyle said.

“Tell her to come in and have something to eat.”

The horn blared again, impatiently, as he went out the door and trotted across the lawn to the car.

The window on the driver’s side was rolled down. When he reached the car Marianne peered up at him crookedly from the driver’s seat. The sweet perfume brought tears to his eyes. Her breath carried a heavy odor of mint that did not quite mask the sour smell.

“Hi, lover. Glad to see me?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m back to see you. Just like I promised. Want to go for a ride?”

“I can’t. I-I’m eating dinner.”

“Oh, yes you can. I think you’d better. Never forget that you owe me.”

Kyle looked back over his shoulder. At the kitchen window he could see the shadow of Mrs. Simms’s head and shoulders.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Elkhorn City.”

“Good God, why?”

“I have business there.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Nobody asked what you think.”

It was time, he decided, to stop being a wuss. This girl could cause him a lot of trouble, sure, but sometime he had to put a stop to this blackmail. It might as well be now.

“I’m not going.”

Her eyes narrowed for a moment, then she spoke again in a parody of a little girl’s pleading voice. “Please, Kyle, I need you to do the driving. I’m strong enough, but I’m not so well coordinated since … the other night.”

“No. Forget it. I’m out of this.”

“You don’t want me to make trouble for you.”

“Do what you want.”

“Kyle, I *have* to do this,” she said. “Help me just this one time and I’ll leave you alone.”

He pushed himself back from the car and looked off to the west where the last glow of the sunset was fading. The sun would still be shining back in California. What wouldn’t he give to be there right now? If he refused to drive Marianne tonight he had no doubt she would tell everybody her version of what happened in Elkhorn City and afterward. Though he did not think he committed an actual crime, there would still be inquiries and explanations required. The whole thing could drag on keeping him here for months. On the other hand, if he could take on this one last odious task, drive the girl fifteen miles to do whatever she felt had to be done, he would be free.

“Okay,” he said finally.

Marianne smiled at him. He looked away. She hoisted herself awkwardly over the center pedestal and gear shift while he got in behind the wheel. With Mrs. Simms watching from the window, he

backed the little car around and gunned it out to the highway, turning there toward Elkhorn City.

"Where, exactly, do you want to go?" he asked as they sped over the dark, deserted highway.

"I'll tell you when we get there."

Kyle drove leaning to his left, toward the open window, drawing in as much of the sweet night air as he could.

After a minute he said, "What's your business that's so important?"

"You'll see."

The cold hand of dread squeezed his kidney area, but he was too far into this now to turn back. He kept repeating silently to himself, *This is the last of her, the last, the last …*

The night was clear and scented with blossoms as Kyle tooled the Mustang into Elkhorn City. The young people of the town strolled the streets in small groups laughing, flirting, having fun. Kyle envied them so much he ached.

"Turn here."

He followed Marianne's directions and left the main street, named, as they all were in the Midwest, "Main Street." They drove beneath big old shade trees, past houses with people sitting on the porches talking, smoking, enjoying the night. Everything normal. Everything nice.

Another turn, and another, and they were on the edge of town. They passed an auto wrecking yard, an abandoned railroad siding, a sawmill. Marianne touched his arm and pointed to a wooden sign illuminated by a single light bulb:

ZENITH MOBILE HOME PARK

"That's it."

Kyle steered in through the ungated iron fence and down a roadway that passed between rows of large mobile homes. The

flickering glow of television sets could be seen behind many of the windows. A few people, mostly elderly, were outside in lawn chairs talking quietly or just sitting in the warm June night.

Marianne gestured him on toward the back of the lot. As they continued the mobile homes grew progressively smaller, the yards shabbier, until they came to the rear fence where the old beatup travel trailers were parked.

Marianne pointed at a rusting rectangular trailer with flaking yellow paint and faded awnings over the windows.

"That one."

A familiar yellow Custom Kawasaki stood off to the side under an awning.

Kyle said, "Isn't that the Gerstner kid's bike?"

"That's right. Fabian lives here with his brother Jesse. If we're lucky they'll both be home."

Kyle turned in the seat to face her. "Marianne, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Without answering she reached down between the seats and drew out a heavy, long-bladed screwdriver.

"What's that for?"

"You don't want to know."

She got out of the car and pulled off the denim jacket. Underneath she had a tight yellow tank top. She shoved the screwdriver, blade-first, down the back of her jeans. Kyle started to get out.

"I think you better wait here." The words were spoken softly, but with unmistakable menace.

He wanted to get out of the car, do something, stop this girl from whatever it was she had in mind. He wanted to, he knew he should … but he didn't do anything. Instead, he leaned back in the seat, wrapped his arms around himself, and tried not to think. With a morbid fascination, he watched Marianne walk jerkily up the

short path to the door of the trailer.

• • •

Fabian Gerstner, wearing only a pair of white jockey shorts, lay on one of the two narrow beds that folded up flush with the wall when not in use. In practice, the beds were hardly ever folded up. Fabian and his brother Jesse were not big on housekeeping.

Fabian tipped a can of Blatz and took a long swallow, not taking his eyes from the 15-inch television screen where Charles Bronson was stalking the bad guys in an old movie. He paid no attention to the *chunk* of a car door outside. It would not be Jesse coming home. Jesse was at the Forty-One Road House hustling what he could at the pool table and would not be back before midnight. Nobody else would be coming to their trailer.

Wham! Bronson gut shot one of the bad guys with a pistol the size of an artillery piece. Blood spurted from the bad guy's belly and the guy flew backward through a plate glass window.

"All *right*!" Fabian cheered, grabbing another swallow of beer.

Fump, fump, fump. Somebody was knocking at the loose aluminum trailer door.

"Shit," he muttered. Just when the movie was getting to the good part.

He got up and made his way between the beds, carrying the beer can. The first thing that hit him when he opened the door was the smell. It was heavy and sweet, but under that … something like old garbage.

Then he recognized the girl who was standing there. Marianne For Chrissake Avery. She wore a skimpy tank top that let her nipples show through, and a pair of skintight jeans. In the glow from the television set her face had a peculiar look. Fabian stood trying to figure exactly what was wrong.

"Hi," she said. "Can I come in?"

He looked over her shoulder. A red Mustang was parked out on the roadway. He could not be sure, but it looked like somebody was sitting in it. “What do you want?”

“Hey, don’t get spooked. I didn’t report you guys or anything. You didn’t think I would, did you?”

His eyes got sly. “Report us for what?”

“Is Jesse here?”

“No. Just me.”

“Then I guess you’ll have to do. Can I come in?”

“What do you want?” he said again.

“Can’t you guess?”

Behind him shots rang out as Charles Bronson continued his war on evildoers.

A slow grin grew on Fabian’s face. “You liked it, huh? The other night?”

“What do you think?”

“Yeah, a lot of girls like it rough. You kind of surprise me, though.”

“I’m full of surprises.”

He moved back out of the doorway. “Come on in.”

Marianne stepped inside and pulled the trailer door shut behind her.

Fabian gestured with the Blatz can. “Want a beer?”

“No.”

He took a closer look at her in the light. She really didn’t look that great tonight. Her eyes had dark shadows, and there was no life in them. Her hair was matted. Her skin looked sallow and kind of loose around her face. Still, she was Marianne Avery, the candyass Homecoming Queen and cheerleader who wouldn’t have walked on the same side of the street as the Gerstner brothers before. You never knew what was going to turn the bitches on.

He ran his thumbs around the elastic band of his shorts. “So …

you want to have some fun?"

"That's why I'm here."

He frowned, remembering something. "Who's that out in the car?"

"Nobody important. Don't worry, he won't bother us."

"I'll just make sure of that." He stepped past her and latched the door, then turned back to face her, rubbing his hairy stomach. "Now we for sure won't be disturbed."

Marianne reached behind her back, as though to pull down her jeans. Instead, she drew out a heavy mechanic's screwdriver.

"What's that for?"

"This is what we're going to have fun with."

Jesus, a kinky one. Who would have guessed it. He said, "I got something here better than that."

"I doubt it," she said.

She smiled then, a dark, crooked smile, and drew the screwdriver back, her right hand gripping the handle. While Fabian was still wondering what she was going to do, she pumped it forward with more strength than a girl should have, and plunged the long blade into his belly just below the navel with a liquid *pop*.

Fabian looked down at the yellow plastic handle protruding from his gut. Dark red blood welled out around it and ran down to soak the front of his jockey shorts. He looked up at the girl. Her head was cocked at a weird angle. She smiled. Her tongue slid out over her lips. He wondered at the purplish color of her tongue, then all of a sudden he felt really sick.

He dropped to his knees and his gut started to hurt bad. He grabbed at the handle of the screwdriver, but it was slick with his blood and he could not get a grip to pull the thing out of him. He could feel the cold blade lodged deep inside. Something was loose, sloshing around in there. And it hurt worse now. Sonofabitch, it hurt.

“Help me.” His voice sounded weak and burbly. He tried to clear his throat, but the effort made his gut hurt all the more. “Help me.”

Marianne looked down at the kneeling young man, smiling that off-center smile. She put the flat of her hand into his face and pushed. With no strength left to resist, Fabian went over backwards. His knees popped as both legs were trapped under him. He didn’t feel the torn tendons as an icy cold began to spread up from the screwdriver blade in his belly.

The light in the trailer got all patchy, like somebody had pulled a ragged curtain over his face. There were moving swatches of black, like bats fluttering in front of his eyes. He was cold. So cold. He wanted a blanket. Why didn’t Mama bring him a blanket?

More and more bats flew in. Where were they coming from? Pretty soon they blacked out the little patches of light. In the back behind the bats he could see Mama standing over him. It was Mama, wasn’t it? Why didn’t she bring him a blanket? He was so cold. And his tummy hurt. He shouldn’t have eaten those crabapples. Mama warned him not to. Maybe that’s why she didn’t bring him a blanket now. She was punishing him. But he was so cold. And he hurt so bad. And the bats the bats the bats were so many he couldn’t see Mama any more. He couldn’t see anything. He could only shiver and hurt and then he …

• • •

Although the evening was comfortably cool, Kyle’s shirt was soaked under his arms and down his back when Marianne came out of the trailer, closing the aluminum door securely as she left. Light from the television screen flickered at the trailer window. Faint sounds of a tire-screeching car chase came from inside.

Marianne stopped outside the car. She stuck the screwdriver blade between her thighs, closed her legs, and drew it out, leaving a

dark stain on her jeans. Then she got in beside Kyle.

"We can go now."

He did not ask her what happened in there.

He did not want to hear.

He did not want to think.

Kyle drove out of the Zenith Mobile Home Park, back through Elkhorn City, and down the blacktopped highway to Bischoff trying very hard not to think.

TEN

Kyle's enthusiasm for doing anything around the farm vanished. The morning after his return with Marianne from Elkhorn City he dragged himself out of bed and sleepwalked through the day. He barely heard Mrs. Simms and Uncle Bob when they spoke to him. His answers were monosyllables. He ate, but the food was tasteless. After lunch he wandered across the pasture, down to the creek that bordered Uncle Bob's land. Fritz, the big collie, bounded along with him, but Kyle found no joy this day in the dog's company. He sat on a rock at the edge of the water and stared unseeing at the trees on the other bank.

How could his life have gone so wrong in such a short time? A month ago his biggest concern was whether to let his hair grow or cut it short. He was a happy, uncomplicated college boy looking forward to a summer of sun and fun. Now he had problems he could not have imagined. Through no fault of his own he was shackled to a girl whose physical condition was something he did not even want to define. She had in all probability committed some heinous crime last night, and he was technically an accomplice.

No, damn it, he could not say he was blameless for this mess. It was he, after all, who was at the wheel when the car rolled. It was he who urged the strange Gypsy to bring the girl back. His motives may have been selfish, but he certainly had not foreseen the terrible consequences. He was caught now in a mire of despair that drew him ever downward.

Anxious to do anything to get out of the house, he volunteered to drive into town after supper and pick up tomorrow's groceries for Mrs. Simms. At least it would give him a task to occupy his mind

and maybe push back the black thoughts for a little while.

He drove the crawfishing Plymouth into town and continued past the Thriftway. No hurry about the groceries, and a beer or two to take the edge off his thoughts seemed like a good idea. He parked in front of Dave & Emma's Tavern. One thing you had to say for the town of Bischoff — there was always a parking space.

The evening crowd was larger and livelier than the afternoon customers the first time Kyle had been in. Most of them had a farmer look — rough clothes, seamed faces, work-hardened hands. A couple of booths were occupied by young people wearing baseball caps and T-shirts that read *Kaufman's Hardware*. It seemed to Kyle that conversation stopped and everyone looked at him when he walked in. Several people nodded, and there were even a few smiles.

Oh, great, I'm getting accepted.

The barmaid with the Popeye forearms came over at once when he took a stool.

"How ya doin'?"

"Fine. Could I have a beer?"

"Why not. That's what we're in business for." She brought a brimming glass and set it on the bar in front of him. "You know, a lot of people like the way you lit into the Gerstner kid the other day."

"Yeah, well, I guess I did it without thinking."

"He was a mean kid from a mean family. You like to think there's a little good in everybody, but it's hard to say anything nice about the Gerstners."

Was.

Kyle sipped his beer and wished she would go away.

The barmaid leaned across the bar. "Say, maybe you didn't hear what happened to him last night."

"Happened to who?"

“Fabian Gerstner.”

“Last night?” Kyle felt his ears getting hot. He had never been good at pretending.

“Somebody got into his trailer and killed him.”

Kyle swallowed beer to clear his throat. “Do they know who did it?”

The barmaid shrugged. “Not that I heard. Could’ve been a lot of people. The Gerstners ain’t real well liked around here.”

Kyle shook his head, trying to look concerned. He did not trust his voice.

A deeply wrinkled man in Oshkosh B’Gosh overalls leaned into the conversation. “Guy stabbed him in the belly is what I hear. They say he took a long time to die.” He chuckled, a sound like the rustle of dry leaves. “You ask me, it couldn’t happen to a better fella.”

Several people at the bar murmured agreement. Kyle stretched his mouth in a weak smile. He gulped the last of his beer and put a bill on the bar.

The woman shoved it back toward him. “That was on the house.”

“I buy you one?” said the wrinkled man.

“No thanks. Gotta go.”

“Catch you next time.”

“Take care,” the barmaid told him.

Kyle escaped out onto Main Street feeling stifled. He forced himself to suck in several deep breaths. Not only was he accepted in Dave’s, he was some kind of hero. What if they knew he was accomplice to a murder. Maybe they thought he *was* the murderer. What if the police came around? What would he tell them? Oh, shit.

He got into the Plymouth, squeezed his eyes shut and tried to think of something else. No good. There *was* nothing else. He started the car and drove up into the small parking lot beside the Thriftway. Inside he concentrated fiercely on filling the grocery list

Mrs. Simms had given him. Thank God, nobody spoke to him.

When he pulled into Uncle Bob's road he saw a strange car parked up by the tool shed. In a flash of panic he thought: *Police!*

No, that was ridiculous. The police don't drive bronze Buick Electras. He parked alongside the Buick, lifted out the two bags of groceries, and carried them to the house.

Mrs. Simms showed him where to put the bags down in the kitchen. She said, "Frank Avery's upstairs with your uncle."

"Oh?"

"Marianne's father."

"Yeah, I know."

"I think he really came to see you."

"Me?"

"He looked worried."

Kyle started to get that walls-closing-in feeling. What had Marianne told her father?

He said, "I think I left the keys in the car."

"Don't worry about it. We got no car thieves in Bischoff."

You'd be surprised to know what you've got in Bischoff.

"I'll go check anyway." Kyle started for the kitchen door.

"Kyle?" The man's voice hit him like a punch between the shoulder blades.

He turned and faked it as best as he could. "Oh, hi, Mr. Avery."

"Are you on your way out?"

"I was just, uh, going out to the car."

"I'll walk with you."

The kitchen door closed behind them and they walked slowly toward the outbuildings where the two cars were parked. Kyle could sense the older man's tension.

"Hold it a minute."

Kyle stopped and turned reluctantly to face him.

"I'm worried about Marianne."

"Worried?"

The reflected light from the kitchen window on his lenses made Frank Avery's eyes invisible.

"Since the night you two went to the dance in Elkhorn City … since the accident … she's been, I don't know different. Is it possible she was hurt in the accident more seriously than we thought?"

"I don't know, Mr. Avery. She seemed all right."

"I'm not trying to blame you or anything. I'm just looking for some answers. Marianne always had a hearty appetite, ate everything my wife put in front of her. Now she barely picks at her food. She stays in her room all day and goes out at night up until all hours. I don't know when she sleeps. Or where. She doesn't come down to the store any more. I just don't know what's wrong."

"Has she seen a doctor?" Kyle dreaded the answer.

"That's another thing. She refuses to go. Won't even talk about it. And the way she looks … well, she's been over here. You've seen her."

"I've seen her." Kyle suppressed a shudder.

"Then you know what I mean. She's a naturally pretty girl, always has been. Took pride in her appearance. If anything, she spent too much time primping. But now she just won't take care of herself. And she doesn't look healthy. Mrs. Avery and I are at our wits' end."

"I wish I could help you, Mr. Avery." *I wish you'd go away, Mr. Avery, I've got troubles of my own.*

"Well, I just thought — hoped — you might have seen something or remembered something that might explain what's happened to her."

An image flashed into Kyle's mind. He saw himself telling Marianne's father how she was raped by three hoods while he did nothing. How she lay in the road after the accident with her head crooked and not breathing. How the strange Gypsy took her into his

camper and did God knows what. And how she then revived, or so it appeared. And how she later squatted over him in the tool shed. And how she walked into Fabian Gerstner's trailer with a long-bladed screwdriver and walked out wiping the blood off it. Yeah, right, describe all that to her father.

He said, "I just don't know, Mr. Avery. I'm sorry."

"I know you are, Kyle." Then, an afterthought. "And how are you? Any aftereffects from the accident."

"Bumps and bruises. I'm a little sore still, that's all."

"You were lucky."

Right, lucky. "I guess I was."

They reached the two cars parked side by side.

"I wish you'd come over if you get a chance. Marianne might talk to you."

"I'll do that." *Sure I will, when cows learn to dance*.

"We'd appreciate it. So long, Kyle."

"So long, Mr. Avery."

Kyle watched the Buick's taillights recede down the dirt road toward the highway. The black sky, clear and sparkling with stars, pressed down on him. With hands jammed into his pockets, he slouched back to the house.

The kitchen, brightly lit as always, was empty. He heard voices from the living room. Curious, he walked down the hall to the parlor.

While Mrs. Simms stood by, Uncle Bob sat holding a telephone to his ear with his good left hand. The metal crutches leaned against the side of his chair. The working half of his face was smiling broadly.

"That's great, son," he said into the mouthpiece as Kyle entered. "We'll really be glad to have you home. 'Bye."

Mrs. Simms took the instrument from his hand and replaced it in the cradle.

Kyle walked into the room. Uncle Bob beamed at him.

"Carney's coming home."

"He's out?"

"The early discharge came through."

A ray of light in the darkness. "When will he be here?"

"By the end of the week. Gosh, it'll be good to have him home."

"That's great." *You don't know the half of it.* "I'd better call my folks and tell them to expect me home."

"It doesn't mean you have to leave, Kyle. Heck, spend the summer if you want. You and Carney could get to know each other."

"Gee, I'd like to, but there are things I should be doing back at home."

"Whatever you think." Uncle Bob was too happy at the prospect of his son's return to care much what his nephew did.

So relieved and happy was Kyle at the thought of getting the hell away from here and from *her* that he lay for hours in bed, listening to the song of the tree frogs outside and grinning into the darkness. At last, for the first time in many days, he slipped off into an easy, dreamless sleep.

• • •

As Kyle slept, Bert Wagstaff, a trucker working the run between Duluth and Milwaukee dropped off his hitchhiker on the edge of Elkhorn City. When his headlights had picked her up thumbing on the road through Bischoff he had thought he had a nice sexy little number to ride into Milwaukee with him. When she got in and he got a close look and, worse, a whiff of her he was relieved to learn he'd be rid of her in just fifteen miles. Once the girl was out of his cab he rolled down both windows and hit the accelerator to blow out the stench she had left behind. She was on her way to visit a

friend, the girl had told him. Bert Wagstaff was not a religious man, but as he roared south toward Milwaukee he thanked God that he was not that friend.

ELEVEN

Jesse Gerstner dug his fingernails into the bony buttocks of the woman under him and pumped hard, stabbing his smallish penis into her again and again.

"Take it honey, take it honey, take it honey!"

Pauline Stebbins lay passively on the bed, her slip hiked up under her small breasts, her panties on the floor. She gazed idly around the room, not wanting to look at Jesse. Her jaws worked without enthusiasm on the wad of Juicy Fruit.

Jesse pulled one hand away from Pauline's ass and slapped her hard across the face. "Come on, you slut, put something into it. Move your ass."

Pauline's face reddened and her pale eyes grew watery, but the rhythm of her gum chewing did not change. It was not the first time she had been hit by a man. And it surely would not be the last.

She let her mind wander while Jesse huffed his way toward orgasm. He wasn't nearly the athlete in bed he thought he was. Most men weren't. Pauline's recent husband had been better than any of them. Teague Stebbins was another man who liked to hit. Only he used his closed fist. Bruised her up so bad sometimes she had to cake on the makeup so she'd look halfway presentable at work.

Aside from the hitting, Teague wasn't a bad man. He let her keep the tips she made at the Elkhorn Steak House and paid the rent out of his own earnings at the sawmill. But he was gone now, run off three months ago to Milwaukee. Maybe he'd come back one day. Maybe not. Pauline had been on her own before. One way or another, she'd make it.

Reluctantly, she returned her attention to the present. Jesse Gerstner was not her idea of a Prince Charming, not by a long shot. But he was always good for a few bucks, and he never hung around her trailer afterward. Pauline liked to be left alone to clean up as soon as she could. To speed things along now she jerked her pelvis up to meet Jesse's thrusts and made little whimpering sounds she hoped he would take for pleasure.

"Aah, that's more like it. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Do it, honey!"

Jesse's climax came suddenly, and was over in seconds. Disappointing, as always. Dumb bitch didn't know how to fuck. None of them did. He rolled off of her and wiped his cock on the sheet.

"You ought to learn to give head," he said.

"I can't do that, Jesse. It makes me throw up."

"You're a fuckin' prude."

"No, I'm not. I just don't like to suck that thing."

He pulled on his red nylon briefs, his tight black pants, and the Packers T-shirt. He shoved his feet into a new pair of Adidas and knotted the laces.

"At least you got your jollies tonight," he said.

"I didn't think I'd be seein' you for a while, what with your brother gettin' killed and all."

"Yeah, well, life goes on," he said. From a pants pocket he pulled a wad of crumpled bills, separated two of them, and tossed them onto the bed. "Don't spend it all in one place."

He went out without looking back at her. The trailer Pauline lived in was cleaner and larger than the Gerstners', but not good enough to be parked with the mobile homes at the front of the lot.

She wasn't much good in the sack, Jesse reflected, but she was handy.

He trudged back toward the yellow trailer he had shared with his younger brother, and which was now his alone. At least that

much good had come from Fabian's death. Then there was the Kawasaki. Jesse would get that too, providing Lloyd didn't give him an argument. That wasn't likely. The eldest Gerstner brother didn't like motorcycles. Jesse didn't care much about them either, but he figured he could sell it for a nice piece of change.

It was time he got something out of life, Jesse figured. As the middle brother, he was always the one nobody noticed. Lloyd was eight years older, and had beat the shit out of him since he was big enough to stand up. And Fabian, ugly as he became in his teens, was one of those cute little kids everybody fussed over. All Jesse ever got was shit.

One thing he knew, he was the smartest of the three brothers. Lloyd was 30 years old, working as a grease monkey at Zale's Auto Repair. Fabian could barely write his own name, and would never have amounted to cow-flop. Jesse was the only one of the three who had finished high school. Now, with the money he would get from selling the trailer and the cycle he could get the hell out of Elkhorn City. No opportunities here for somebody with Jesse's smarts. He had plans. He would go to Milwaukee, Chicago. Down to Florida, maybe. There were a lot of ways a smart dude could score there. He whistled merrily as he walked along the back fence of the lot.

He paused to frown at the ugly yellow trailer. He wouldn't have to live like this much longer. Get the cash and haul ass. Elkhorn City would soon see the last of Jesse Gerstner.

He pulled open the door to the trailer and stepped inside.

What the fuck was that smell?

His first thought was: *Fabian's back*. But that was crazy. All the same, it sure as hell smelled like something dead in here. With an overlay of cheap perfume.

Jesse reached for the light switch. His peripheral vision barely registered a shadow of movement behind him, then something

scraped down over his face and cinched tight around his neck.

"What the fu — " His words were squeezed back down into his chest. He raked at the thing around his neck and recognized by the feel it was a thin leather belt. His own. The one with the fake alligator grain.

The belt tightened a notch, and a horrible thought blazed into Jesse's mind: *Somebody's trying to kill me!*

He reached back behind his head, clawing the air, searching for something solid to fight. He found hands and pulled at them, but the grip was too strong for him to budge. He raked the clenched fists with his fingernails and felt little gobbets of flesh come loose. The stench in his nostrils was like a physical blow.

Jesse's lungs heaved, fighting for the tiny hiss of air he managed to pull in. Slowly, very slowly, the belt tightened. To yell for help was impossible. With every heartbeat the blood pounded like a pair of rocks hitting him in the temples. In the darkness of the trailer bright lights flashed on and off behind his eyes. A blacker darkness began to close in from the edges of his vision.

His bowels let go. He could feel the watery feces sliding down his legs, and he could smell his own stink over the other. The trailer floor slammed painfully into his knees, then his face. A pressure in the middle of his back kept him prone. Notch by notch the strangling belt tightened.

There was a rushing in his ears like he was standing under the Menomonee Falls. Then everything started to drift away. He was going now, and he didn't care. At least there would be no more pain.

The belt loosened a fraction.

Air whistled through the bruised throat into his lungs. He tasted the gritty floor of the trailer on his lolling tongue. He tasted blood. He dragged in another labored breath and all the pain returned — his neck, his head, his back. Each heartbeat slammed

him like a hammer blow. He tried to move, but whoever, whatever, held him down was much too strong. He fought for another tiny breath. Then another.

And the belt tightened again.

Once more the red flashes, the encroaching blackness, the roaring rushing noise in his ears. Sinking again into soft oblivion.

The belt loosened.

Jesse Gerstner's poor blasted brain was incapable of counting the times he was choked to the brink of death, then brought back. He was only dimly aware that it happened again, and again, and again. In the stink of his assailant and of his own excrement, his mouth filled with blood and vomit, his head feeling swollen to bursting, Jesse would have prayed for death if he knew how to pray. With a last explosion as blood vessels burst in his brain, death finally came.

• • •

The residents of the Zenith Mobile Home Park were not one big happy family. The fifty or so people who lived there were divided rigidly into their own groups. There were the older retired people who lived in the large, comfortable mobile homes near the front. Then the young couples just starting out together who were only here until they could afford a real house. Finally the riffraff who occupied the shabby travel trailers set well in the back to screen them from the road. There were also a few like Pauline Stebbins and her departed husband who fit no category. They were considered transients. Not troublemakers, but loners who came and went with no one taking much notice.

Thus, when sudden violence befell one of the residents, as it did Fabian Gerstner, the act was viewed from quite different perspectives. The backlotters professed no great surprise at the murder of one of the odious Gerstner brothers. They had no known

friends outside, and an excess of enemies. No one cared to name names when the police came around, and the investigation languished.

The young strivers preferred not to talk about it, renewing their resolve to get out of Zenith at the earliest opportunity.

The retired people, being more aware of their own mortality, began locking their trailers at night and spending less time sitting outside after sundown. None of them was personally acquainted with the Gerstner brothers, but they knew vaguely that it was an unsavory family. They sought to shut out that aspect of life in Zenith by staying inside at night with the windows blinded.

So it was that after the second Gerstner died soaked in his own body wastes, no one in the park was watching as the female figure left the rusting trailer and walked with an uneven gait out to the road. No one caught the foul odor that was carried from the girl on the evening breeze.

• • •

Driving back from Appleton, where he had failed to get into the pants of his girlfriend, Harry Muhlbach muttered darkly to himself, figuring he must be the last 20-year-old virgin in Marathon County, if not in the entire state of Wisconsin. His friends in Elderon would, of course, never hear the real story. For them he was already concocting a scenario where he flings Laurie Imhoff on the bed and "turns her every way but loose."

It was while these imaginings brought back the ache in his scrotum that Harry's headlights picked up the trim, unmistakably female figure thumbing at the side of the road.

Hoo-eee, maybe he was about to get lucky for once in his life. As he stomped the brakes his mind was already racing ahead with visions of wild sexy happenings in the back seat of his Taurus.

The visions vanished like smoke the instant the girl climbed in

beside him. Her face was puffed and unhealthy looking. There was a pussy wound on one arm and furrows of skin gouged from the backs of her hands. Her head was cocked to one side, and where her eyes should have reflected the safety light when he opened the door, there were only shadows.

And she stank.

When she slumped into the passenger seat Harry leaned as far to the left as possible and drove like something was after him. Thank God she was only going as far as Bischoff. When the girl climbed out he peeled rubber getting out of there.

TWELVE

Kyle had not seen his cousin Carney since they were aged, respectively, 6 and 7. His impression back then was that Carney was a nerdy teacher's-pet type. His fingernails were always clean, his hair always damp-combed, and he carried a respectful attitude toward adults.

In the intervening years his interest in Carney's activities was minimal. The bits relayed by his mother from Uncle Bob's letters seemed always to concern some prize won by Carney or some notable achievement. Although it was never mentioned, Kyle always felt that his own modest exploits were being measured against his cousin's successes.

When his Aunt Esther died when he was 12, Kyle had been scheduled for a trip back to Wisconsin with his mother. He was spared that one by the onset of a timely case of chicken pox. Since then no mention had been made of going back. Uncle Bob, Cousin Carney, the whole state of Wisconsin receded in Kyle's memory to unimportant childhood names. His need for a cousin was on a level with his need for boils.

However, on the day Carney was due to return home, discharged from the army, Kyle might have been preparing to welcome his dearest friend. He insisted on driving into town with Mrs. Simms to meet his cousin at the bus station. He chattered happily all the way, unfazed by Mrs. Simms's monosyllabic response.

When Carney swung down from the Greyhound looking tanned and healthy, his light hair cropped close, military style, Kyle could have kissed him. He did bound over and give him a manly clap on

the shoulder.

“Carney, hey, you look terrific. Military life must have agreed with you, right? How the hell are you?”

Carney had a moment of confusion while he placed the exuberant young man. “Kyle? Sure, it must be. Great to see you. And Mrs. Simms, thanks for coming down. How’s my dad?”

The housekeeper stepped up and gave him a hug, the most emotion Kyle had seen her display.

“Your father’s better than he was,” she said. “Not as good as he might be. Havin’ you home should perk him up considerable.”

Carney took the keys to the Plymouth from Mrs. Simms, then stopped short as he walked around to throw his bag in the trunk. He bent down and squinted along the uneven side panel.

“What happened to the car?”

“I’m afraid that’s my doing,” Kyle said. “Rolled it in the rain. It still runs after a fashion, but I owe your Dad for repairs.”

“Was anybody hurt?”

Kyle shivered, covered it with a shrug. “Luckily, we came out with just bruises.”

“It’s probably time we got a new one, anyway.”

On the drive back to the farm Carney took the wheel. Mrs. Simms filled him in on the hometown happenings while Kyle sank into the upholstery in the back seat wondering if she would pass on the gossip about Marianne. When she said nothing, he gradually relaxed in anticipation of his deliverance.

Carney turned in to the farm and had barely stepped out of the car when Fritz came bounding across the lawn to welcome him home with an explosion of tail wagging and wet kisses. Kyle felt a pang of jealousy at losing his closest friend in Wisconsin. He had enjoyed the rough-housing and the walks through the pasture land with the big dog, but it was clear that now the master was home. What the hell, he would willingly give him up as a tradeoff for his

release.

Mrs. Simms took Carney upstairs to see his father while Kyle busied himself packing and straightening up the room he'd been using. He was cinching up the buckles of his roll bag when his cousin walked in.

"I really want to thank you for helping out while Dad was down," Carney said.

"I didn't do all that much," Kyle said truthfully.

"Just the same, Dad and I appreciate it." He looked down at the packed and buckled bag. "You don't have to leave right away, do you?"

"I really should. There are things I have to attend to back home."

"Female things?" Carney gave him a cousinly wink.

Kyle managed to chuckle. "Well, you know how it is."

"I sure do. Dad tells me you met Marianne."

"Well, I, uh, yeah."

"What did you think?"

"Some girl."

"You can say that again. I'm going over there tonight to pick up where I left off."

"Yeah, well, that's great."

"Too bad you're not going to be around for a while. Marianne has some really cute friends. We could double date."

"Sounds like fun, but, well, you know …"

"Sure. You're in a hurry to get back to California. You going with anybody special back there?"

"No, just taking life as it comes."

"You'll wear yourself out. You ought to settle on one."

"There's plenty of time for that."

"Sure there is. Just kidding. Meanwhile, don't do anything I wouldn't do."

The hearty man-to-man banter was giving Kyle a stomach ache. It was a relief when Carney left to visit the cows with Fritz and Amos Deerfoot. He wished it were possible to slip out of here and be gone by the time Carney had his reunion with Marianne, but the earliest bus leaving for Milwaukee was ten o'clock tomorrow morning. One good thing: he would not have to be present when his cousin came face to face with the love of his life and saw what she had become.

• • •

After supper Carney Reuthman could barely contain his excitement as he drove the limping Plymouth out of his father's farm and turned down the blacktop highway toward Bischoff. In the two years-plus that he had been in the army he had dreamed often about the day he would return and claim Marianne for his own. His visits home on leave had been good, but there was never time to relax. Now he was back for real, and he intended tonight to make it official between him and Marianne.

He smiled, remembering the first sweet time she had given herself to him. Marianne had been just 16, though mature for her age, he reminded himself, and Carney two years older, a sophisticated high school senior. It was, of course, her first time with anybody. Teenagers of Bischoff, Wisconsin did not go all the way as young and eagerly as the girls of, say, California where Cousin Kyle lived.

For Carney it had been the second time. His first was with a whore in Appleton where he had gone with his buddies and a carload of Stevens Point beer. He had felt like a complete dork as the girl had to gently position him for the act and pretty much show him how to do it. But it came off all right, and he felt much more a man afterwards.

After all the hours he and Marianne had spent talking about

doing it, the act itself had come almost as an anticlimax. So concerned was Carney that he would hurt the girl that she finally had to grab him around the buttocks and pull him forcefully into her.

Afterward she cried, and he almost did too. They vowed undying love, and Carney tried hard to convince himself he meant it. Only after the months spent away from Marianne did he realize that by God, he *did* mean it.

Tonight he would ask her formally to marry him. Probably he should have picked up a ring, but with worrying about Dad's stroke and all the red tape of getting the discharge, there hadn't been an opportunity. Anyway, it would be more fun to go down to Weisfield's and pick it out together.

In this warm glow Carney parked the battered Plymouth on the dark, tree-lined street and strode up to the door of Marianne's house.

Mr. Avery answered his ring. He looked older, with new lines on his forehead and at the corners of his mouth.

"Carney?"

"Hello, Mr. Avery."

"For gosh sake, why didn't you tell us you were coming? How long are you home for?"

"For good. I'm out."

"Well, that's … that's wonderful. You should have told us. We'd have planned something."

"I wanted to surprise Marianne."

Mr. Avery's eyes flickered behind the bifocal lenses. "Uh, yes, I see."

Carney looked over the man's shoulder. "Is she home? Marianne?"

"Who is it, Frank?" Mrs. Avery's voice preceded her down the stairs.

“It’s Carney. He’s out of the army and home for good.”

“Why, that’s wonderful. Here, let me have a look at you.” Mr. Avery stepped aside to let his wife move in and give Carney a hug. She held him maybe a little tighter and a second longer than the situation called for, then stepped back. “My, I think you’ve grown taller.”

“Must be the army food,” he said, laughing. “I was just asking if Marianne was home.”

A look flashed between the parents.

“She’s upstairs,” said Mrs. Avery. “She … hasn’t been feeling well.”

Carney’s concern was genuine. “Gee, I’m sorry to hear that. I hope it’s nothing serious.”

“So do we,” said her mother.

“We’ve been after her to see a doctor,” said Mr. Avery, “but she won’t.”

Carney searched their faces. “Maybe it’d be better if I came back tomorrow.”

“No, son,” Mr. Avery said quickly. “It might do her some good if she sees you.”

“Frank, do you think — ” Mrs. Avery began.

Mr. Avery squeezed his wife’s hand. “It’s all right.” And to Carney, “You know where her room is.”

“Yes, sir.” With a worried look back at the parents, Carney climbed the stairs to the second floor of the big house. With every step his feeling of foreboding grew heavier.

Marianne’s door was closed. Carney rapped lightly with one knuckle. When there was no response he rapped again more loudly.

“What do you want?” The voice was deep and raspy, not at all like Marianne’s animated contralto.

“Is that Marianne?”

“Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Carney.”

“Carney?”

“I’m home for good.”

Nothing from inside.

“Listen, are you okay? I could come back.”

“Wait a minute.” Again the strange husky voice.

A key rattled in the door from inside the room. Since when did anybody lock a bedroom door in Bischoff?

The door opened just wide enough for Carney to enter, then closed again. The room was dark and smoky, the shades pulled down, and it took a minute for Carney’s eyes to adjust. His sense of smell, however, was unimpaired.

“What’s that, incense?”

“It’s strawberry. Do you like it?”

That growly voice was giving him the creeps. “Why is it so dark in here?”

“I like it dark.”

“Can we turn on a light long enough for me to see you?”

“No,” quickly and decisively.

“What’s wrong, Marianne? Your folks said you’re not feeling well.”

“I’m feeling fine. Want to touch me?”

She was standing in front of the window with the blind pulled down, a silhouette in the dim glow from the lights in the neighbor’s house. Carney could make out her hair, which looked tangled and unusually wild for Marianne. And under the powerful incense another smell. Something bad. Something rotting.

She took a step toward him. Fingers seized his wrist. They were not like Marianne’s, soft, warm and gentle. There were hard and cold. And the strength of the grip made him wince.

“I asked if you wanted to touch me. You used to like that. Remember?”

The cold fingers carried his hand up to her breast. She wore a soft linen blouse and nothing underneath. The breast was not firm and rounded as he remembered, but pulpy and loose like a sack of oatmeal. He tried to pull his hand away, but she held him fast.

"What's the matter, Carney? Used to be you were crazy to get your hands on my tits. Did the army turn you queer?"

With a sudden effort he wrenched his hand free. "Marianne, what's happened to you. You don't sound like yourself, you don't act like yourself."

"You've been away. People change."

"You ought to see a doctor. And what's that smell in here?"

"Don't worry about it. It's natural. You want to come to bed with me?"

"You're talking crazy."

She made a grab for his crotch. He saw it coming and jumped back before she could grasp him.

"What the heck are you doing?"

"Trying to get you into bed. Don't you want to fuck me? Plenty of other guys do."

"Stop it, Marianne."

"If you don't think so, ask your cousin."

"If this is a joke, it isn't funny."

"It's no joke," she said in the growling voice. "I promise you, this isn't any joke."

A step at a time Carney moved to the table beside the bed. He reached down to the small lamp there, found the switch, snapped it on.

"Holy shit!" The words were out before he could think.

She covered her face with her hands, bony fingers spidering over the lifeless gray flesh.

"God, Marianne, what's happened to your face?"

With a sound like an animal snarl she sprang forward and

swept the lamp from the table. It smashed on the floor and the room returned to darkness.

"I didn't know you were coming or I'd have fixed myself up," she said. "I can be pretty again."

"Marianne, I have to go."

"Take me to bed, Carney. Fuck me. I know you can. You were the first, remember?"

"Really, I have to go."

Backing away, choking down a rising panic, he found the door, yanked it open, and escaped to the hallway outside.

Mr. and Mrs. Avery were waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs.

"Did … did you see her?" Mr. Avery asked.

Carney nodded. He wanted to plow between the two of them, bolt out the door, and never return.

"Did she talk to you?" asked Marianne's mother.

"She's, like you said, not feeling good."

"What did she say to you," asked Mr. Avery. His voice was pleading.

"Nothing. Nothing very much. I think you ought to get her to a doctor."

Mrs. Avery started to cry. Her husband put an arm around her and pulled her closer.

"I've got to go," Carney said. "Goodnight."

The air outside the Avery house was fresh and cool as bubbling spring water. Carney ran to the Plymouth and drove home with the windows open wide, trying to rid his nose and his clothes of the smell of strawberry incense.

And rot.

THIRTEEN

Kyle stretched out full length on the bed in his room in Uncle Bob's farmhouse. He lay on his back with his hands clasped behind his head. He grinned at the ceiling, breathing deeply and feeling free. He could finally relax and savor this as his last night in Bischoff. Tomorrow he was outta here like a shot.

His red nylon roll bag was packed and buckled and propped up next to the door ready to go. The little radio beside the bed was tuned softly to an Appleton station that played Top 40s. This time tomorrow he would be breathing California air. Memories of Wisconsin, the Gerstner brothers, Dorando the Gypsy, and Marianne — especially Marianne — would fade. Life was good again.

A staccato knock interrupted his reverie. The door opened and his cousin stepped into the room without waiting for an invitation.

Kyle sat up on the bed. "Carney, what's — "

"Get up."

Kyle stared, his mouth open.

"I want to talk to you." Carney strode to the side of the bed and snapped off the radio with an angry twist of his wrist.

"What about?"

"Marianne."

Warning bells clanged. Kyle swung his feet to the floor and stood up to face his cousin.

"What about her?"

"Something's wrong with her. Something serious."

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to tell me you didn't see it?"

Kyle answered cautiously. "She did seem to be coming down

with something."

"What did you do to her? What did you do *with* her?"

"Do?"

"Saturday night. You went out together. I know that."

"We went to a dance over at, what's the town, Elkhorn City. That's all. No big deal. We talked a lot about you."

"You saw her again after that."

"Just when she came over here to see Uncle Bob."

"Don't shit me, Kyle."

"What did she tell you?"

"She said you … you slept together."

"Hey, it wasn't exactly that way, Carney. I mean it didn't mean anything. I didn't plan it."

"Just happened, huh? Swept away by emotion. Bigger than both of you."

Kyle spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "What can I say?" *What if I told you what really happened? How she damn near dragged me out to the tool shed, pulled off my pants and sat on my dick. What if I told you how gross and disgusting it was?*

Carney hit him in the side of the face. It was a slow, clumsy punch, and Kyle saw it coming all the way. He moved his head just enough to rob the blow of its force, but not to get out of the way entirely. Carney stood ready to fight, but Kyle made no move to defend himself.

"Goddammit, why don't you hit back?"

"You deserved a shot at me."

Carney wound up as though to hit him again, but dropped his arm and let his shoulders slump. "I was going to marry her. *Marry her*, for Chrissake."

"Carney, I — "

"Shut up. It's not just that you slept with her. I guess you weren't the only one. Hell, I didn't ask her to join a convent. I went

away, and I wasn't any saint either. I could live with that. But the way she looks … the way she talks. And God, the smell in her room. There's something really wrong with her. I don't know her any more. I don't *want* to know her."

Kyle opened his mouth, shut it again.

"I thought I had my whole life planned out," Carney went on, talking more to himself than to his cousin. "After I got out of the army Marianne and I would get married. We'd take a long honeymoon, come back, live here, maybe build an addition to the house. Eventually I'd take over the farm from Dad. Now, with Dad the way he is and Marianne … Oh, damn, damn, damn."

Carney's eyes filled with tears. He spun away and flung himself out the door, slamming it hard behind him.

Kyle sat back down at the bed and stared at the door. All the good feeling was gone. He would have liked to go after his cousin, say something to ease the pain. But there were no words. There would be no comfort for Carney, not for a while. And, Kyle now saw, not for him either.

He stripped to his skivvies and got into bed. The sheets were cool and crisp, washed and ironed that morning by Mrs. Simms. The quilt kept him warm and cozy, the open window admitted the fresh night air and the lulling song of the tree frogs.

He closed his eyes, but there was to be no sleep for Kyle on his last night in Wisconsin. Whenever he started to drift off disturbing images floated before him.

Marianne as she had been — young, pretty, smiling, clean.

Fabian Gerstner with his sneering mouth and piggy little eyes. And his face contorted in pain as it must have looked when the screwdriver blade punctured his belly.

Dorando the Gypsy. *"I owe you a favor. Tell me what you would have."* And later, *"Do you truly want this?"*

And Marianne as she was now — disheveled, dirty, leering,

corrupt. Marianne rotting away little by little.

He had been so sure of his priorities that Saturday night, standing in the cold rain, looking down at the dead girl. He had not a doubt that what he wanted most in all the world was to bring her back to life. God, if he could have that moment back, the one tiny moment out of all his life, what a different answer he would give the Gypsy.

But there was no going back. No reversing the tape of his life to erase a mistake. The best he could do was move on, go away, forget, and get on with his life. He tried to think of other things: the surf at Zuma Beach, a plump, dripping beef burrito, college in the fall. No good, the ugly images kept returning.

Dawn came at last, gray and unpromising. Kyle watched the rectangle of his window slowly lighten. He heard the night sounds of crickets and frogs fade and give way to the crow of roosters, the chirp of early birds, the bark of a dog answered by another far away.

He got out of bed, dressed, walked quietly along the hall to the bathroom. He washed and brushed his teeth, not bothering to shave, and went back to his room. He made the bed as well as he could. Mrs. Simms would surely strip it down and wash the sheets, but he wanted to leave it looking neat.

Finally he sat down at the table and penned a short note to Uncle Bob. He thanked him for the hospitality, promised to send what he still owed for repairs to the Plymouth. He apologized for not staying to say goodbye in person.

He would have liked to leave a note for Carney too, but just as last night when they were face to face, there were no words for his cousin. It was too bad, but Carney was going to have to deal with the situation his own way.

He shouldered the roll bag and walked quietly down the hall and out the front door. He eased the door shut and started across

the lawn toward the dirt road leading to the highway.

Fritz came nosing out of his doghouse with a little *whuff*. He recognized Kyle and came wagging over to him.

Kyle hunkered down and scratched the collie behind the ear where he liked it. “You’re one guy I’m gonna miss. Take care of your master. He’s going to need it.”

He rose then and walked away, not looking back. The dog followed him part of the way across the lawn. Then, when he saw Kyle was heading for the highway, he returned to the doghouse, lay down, and watched him go.

The sky was gunmetal gray. A fine mist hung in the air. Kyle pulled the windbreaker tight at his throat and strode down the dirt roadway to the blacktop. There he took up a position beside the Reuthman mailbox and waited for a ride headed into Bischoff.

Two cars driven by women, and a milk truck passed him. When someone finally stopped it took Kyle a moment to recognize the beatup camper. When he did, he hesitated. The door opened and a dark familiar face looked down at him. The black eyes of Dorando the Gypsy burned into his.

“Do you want a ride or don’t you?”

“I’m just going into Bischoff. To the bus station.”

“Get in.”

He jammed the camper into gear and they lurched forward. Kyle perched uncomfortably, leaning forward in the passenger seat.

“You’re leaving town.”

“That’s right.” Kyle turned and studied the man’s profile below the brim of his battered felt hat. Dorando had a high forehead, hawk nose, and a long, sharp chin. “How do you happen to be driving along here at this particular time. It’s too much to be a coincidence.”

“It is no coincidence. I feel that my debt to you is not fully paid.”

“Oh, yes, it is. I don’t know who you are, or what you are, but you did exactly what I asked. Don’t do me any more favors. Please.” He thought for a moment. “I don’t suppose you could take me back to that night for another chance?”

“There are no second chances,” said the Gypsy in an eerie echo of Kyle’s own thoughts of the night before. “If there is another way I can help you …”

“No thanks,” Kyle said. “Last time you helped me into the worst thing that ever happened in my life. I’ll handle it myself from here on.”

“As you wish.”

The camper rattled on into the town of Bischoff with no more conversation between the two men. When Dorando stopped and let Kyle off in front of the Rexall store and bus depot, they exchanged a nod, but no goodbyes. It was with a feeling of a weight lifting from his shoulders that Kyle watched the camper disappear around the bend in Main Street at the far end of town.

The morning sidewalks of Bischoff were deserted. An occasional car rolled by, the riders casting a curious look at the young man standing alone in front of the bus depot. Kyle ignored them and settled down on the wooden bench to wait for the Greyhound. It was not due for more than two hours, but he would rather wait here with his own thoughts than force conversation back at the farm with his uncle, his cousin, and Mrs. Simms.

A little after eight o’clock Mr. Avery’s Buick rolled up in front of the New Emporium. Frank Avery hesitated as he got out, and looked across the street. For a moment Kyle thought he was going to come over. Then he appeared to think better of it, crossed the sidewalk to the New Emporium, unlocked the door, and went in.

The sun began to push through the heavy overcast just as the Greyhound rumbled into view around the bend in Main Street. Kyle saw it as a providential sign. He climbed gratefully aboard, stowed

his roll in the overhead rack, and settled into a seat. He smiled at his seatmate, a thin-lipped lady who sniffed once, then ignored him.

The doors flapped shut, the diesel engine growled, and the bus pulled away up Main Street. Kyle watched the small cluster of buildings that was Bischoff, Wisconsin, flow past the window and recede into the distance, and into the past.

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The route taken by the Greyhound through Elkhorn City did not pass Zenith Mobile Home Park. If it had, the passengers would have seen an unusual amount of activity for this hour of the morning. The residents were gathered outside their trailers, talking in low, excited voices. At the back of the park a blue and white Sheriff's car and an ambulance from the County Hospital, both with emergency lights flashing, were parked in front of the rusting trailer that had been occupied by two of the Gerstner brothers.

"How is it nobody found him till today?" the sheriff asked. "He's gotta be dead a good twenty-four hours."

A deputy shrugged. "Nobody much came around. Wasn't for the smell, them kids wouldn't of peeked in either."

Jesse Gerstner's tongue protruded from his mouth like the head of a dead lizard. His face was bloated, the color of eggplant.

"Two murders," the sheriff said, shaking his head sadly. "We ain't had one around here in ten years, not counting Indians. The only good thing is the election was last year."

He rose from his examination of the corpse and stepped outside the trailer for some fresh air.

• • •

Unaware of the police activity, Kyle Brubaker relaxed and leaned back in the upholstered seat of the Greyhound. He let the

farm country flow past his window and enjoyed the feeling of a prisoner released as the miles stretched out between him and the horror of the recent past.

FOURTEEN

The sky above all of Southern California was luminescent pearl gray. The temperature at the beach was in the middle 60s. A brisk offshore breeze raised choppy little waves — nothing that would carry a board. Maybe the sun would burn through sometime this afternoon, maybe not. Kyle Brubaker did not care. He was home.

It was not unusual weather for California in late June. The water was too cold for casual bathers, and all but the most dedicated body surfers stayed away. It was not the kind of a day to attract flatlanders to the beach. For Kyle Brubaker it was perfect.

The short stretch of beach Kyle had chosen lay between two rocky outcroppings between Malibu and Point Dume. It was secluded, hidden from the highway, and used by a hardy few surfers, who were absent today due to the lack of waves. The privacy was the reason Kyle chose it. Since his return a week ago from Wisconsin, this was his first real chance to be alone.

He lay full length on his back on a purple and gold beach towel with a Los Angeles Lakers logo in the center. The corners of the towel were clipped to foot-long spikes driven into the sand to hold it in place against the wind. Kyle's eyes were half-closed, his mind drifting overhead with the seagulls in their aerial ballet. On his little Sony portable the oldies station played Stones hits of the 60s. Life was good again. At last.

It had not troubled him that today all his friends seemed to be otherwise occupied. Dean was in summer school trying to bring up his GPA. Elliot was working with his father in the p.r. department at Warners. Brian was in Greece looking at ruins with his parents. For the first time in his life Kyle appreciated solitude. In the past week

he had been surrounded by people at the beach, at their pools, at home, at the mall. The old party-till-you-barf scene did not have its former zest.

He could, of course, have brought any one of a dozen girls along today. There were plenty of girls available, and Kyle had never been shy about putting the moves on. But strangely, since his return he had no interest in females. He had even experienced a feeling of aversion. It worried him a little, but he supposed it was to be expected, considering his recent experiences. He was sure it would soon wear off.

He laced his fingers behind his head and stared up at the overcast. He would have preferred a bright sun, but no complaints. He would gladly take whatever he got, as long as it was far from the state of Wisconsin. And he could still build his tan through a thin cloud cover like this one. That was something the flatlanders never grasped, resulting in painful burns.

For a time he watched the gulls sail gracefully overhead, scouting for edible garbage along the beach. Ironic that such lovely birds should have such dirty habits. For some reason the idea disturbed him.

He shifted to thoughts of his plans for the evening. There was a party at a friend of a friend's place in Venice. It was an everybody-come, anything-goes blast in a house along one of the old canals. Kyle was not crazy about Venice with its nouveau hippies, mimes, panhandlers, street gangs, and druggies. But that's where the party would be tonight, so that's where he would go. He hoped this one would be something more than the shallow time wasters he had attended since his return. Nobody seemed to have as much fun as they used to. The old zing and spontaneity were missing. The thought nagged at him that maybe the change was not in the parties, but in himself.

Next week he would look for a summer job. Definitely. He

knew Dad would get him something in a minute on Spring Street in one of the financial institutions. But that was not what he wanted. He was not ready yet for the three-piece suit and the attaché case. Time enough for that in a year when he had his degree.

What he wanted was something like for the Park Department, up in Yosemite, maybe. He could work outdoors and maintain his tan, and there was a great opportunity to meet girls. Yes, that was it, he decided, a job that would get him out of the house and away from the old crowd for a while. That should rekindle his fire and, hopefully, revive his interest in sex.

Any thought of sex, no matter how oblique, returned him in spirit to Bischoff and to Marianne Avery. He could picture how fresh and pretty and sexy she was on their first meeting. But as soon as he felt a stirring in his crotch the picture began to blur and change to the Marianne he had seen in the tool shed on Uncle Bob's farm. Instant detumescence.

He had some control over his thoughts, but the nights were bad. Dreams had no internal editor, and they reminded him of things he wanted desperately to forget. Main Street in Bischoff kept reappearing like some surreal ghost town. Dave & Emma's Tavern, the Rexall store, Happy Otto's, the New Emporium, The Idle Hour, the Shawano County Bank, and the rest of the drab, lost buildings raced past as his dream self flew down the street.

Then there was the carnival at Elkhorn City transformed into a hell of clashing fun rides and discordant calliope music. He would see in his sleep the dark figure of the All-Seeing Dorando, and the porcine face of Fabian Gerstner. From Gerstner's bare stomach, spouting blood, grew the handle of the screwdriver. And gripping the handle, Kyle's own hand. A segue to himself in prison with the three Gerstner brothers, naked, huge phalluses erect, advancing on him.

And always lurking somewhere at the edges of his dreams was

Marianne. More than once since coming home he had awakened shouting, sweat soaking his pajamas and the smell of rot in his nostrils.

Kyle rolled over onto his stomach. As he did so he saw coming carefully down the trail from the road — a thick, ungainly figure, dressed in heavy clothing unfit for the beach. *Oh, no, not company. Not today*.

As the figure reached the bottom of the trail and started awkwardly toward him over the sand he saw it was the layers of clothing that gave the illusion of mass. The head was hunched in the collar of a ragged, buttoned-up topcoat. Under the coat there must have been several sweaters — a getup that should have been far too warm even for a cool, breezy day at the beach. The dark, heavy skirt hung down around the clunky shoes.

Bag lady, Kyle thought. Santa Monica's liberal attitude toward transients had attracted more than the city's share of wackos, winos, and bums to the beach area. These were collectively referred to in the press as "the homeless."

He rolled onto his side facing away from the approaching woman. Maybe she would get the message and leave him alone. He did not want to be bothered with some old drunk hustling him for a handout.

The clumsy shoes scuffed to a stop in the sand at the edge of his towel.

"Hello, lover."

The ragged growly voice sent icewater surging through his veins into his brain. Slowly, hating the thought of what he might see, he rolled over.

"Miss me?"

"Marianne?"

She spread the collars of the topcoat and let him have a good look at her face. The skin was an ugly yellow-gray. Her eyes were

deeply sunken, circled by sooty shadows. The flesh caved in under her cheekbones and hung loose at her jawline. The strawberry red hair was a greasy clump at the back of her neck. The smile she gave him made his stomach lurch.

"Glad to see me?"

"How … how did you get here? How did you find me?"

"Never mind. We're together again, Kyle, that's all that matters."

"No." His protest was weak, despairing.

"I'll always find you, wherever you go. We're locked together. You and me. Forever. You know why."

"No!" he cried, more forcefully this time. His mind rejected all that was implied in her words.

"Yes!" The smile vanished as she barked out the single syllable. Yellow mucous trickled from one of her nostrils. She let it slide down her upper lip with no attempt to wipe it away.

Kyle scrambled to his feet. "What do you want from me?"

"I need to be with you, Kyle. You're the only one I *can* be with." She held her knuckly hands to the deteriorating face. "I couldn't stay at home. Not looking like this. So I've come to you."

His mind raced ahead. What to do with this ghastly apparition? He perversely saw himself taking her home to his parents. *Mom, Dad, I'd like you to meet Marianne, a girl I knew back in Wisconsin. You understand, she was a lot prettier then*.

"You can't stay here," he blurted.

"I have to, don't you see? You're responsible for me, for the way I am. You did this to me, Kyle, and now I belong to you."

The words were spoken without anger, but with a cold deadly finality that made Kyle feel for a moment as though he would pass out.

"It's crazy," he said. "It's … wrong!"

"You're a little late in deciding what's right and what's wrong.

You made your decision that night on the road between Bischoff and Elkhorn City. You made your decision and now you're stuck with it. Stuck with me. Now you're going to help me."

"Help you? What do you mean?"

"I have one more job to do."

"What?" *Don't tell me. I don't want to know*.

"Lloyd Gerstner."

"Lloyd?"

"You remember him. He's the oldest and biggest of the three brothers. And he's the last."

"What do you mean last?"

She moved closer to him and he got a nose full of putrefying flesh as the sea breeze shifted momentarily. "Didn't you hear about Jesse? No, I guess you didn't. You left town too fast. It seems Jesse got his neck caught in one of his own belts and choked to death."

"You … killed him?"

"Yes. It took a long time, Kyle, and I enjoyed every minute."

He could only stare at her, his ears ringing with her words.

"So now there's only Lloyd to pay for what they did to me that night. He did the most, so I want him the worst. I can't move around too well by myself. You can imagine why. So I need you to take me to him."

"And what then?"

"Then I will be finished. The bastards will be punished for what they did." She paused, seeming to enjoy his discomfiture. "Yes, Kyle, then I will be through with you too. You can go back to being whatever it is you were before."

"You said you'd never leave me alone."

She shrugged.

"And I'm supposed to believe you now?"

"I don't see that you have any choice."

Kyle turned away from her and looked out over the gray ocean

where seabirds swooped and dived and the breeze scooped little sprays of foam from the whitecaps.

He considered his options. Refuse and this … this thing that had been a girl would cleave to him like a rotting, stinking tumor. He would never be free of her, never live normally again. Do what she asked, and he would again be accomplice to a murder. Even then she might never leave him alone. He could hope that her rate of deterioration might one day cause her to crumble into inanimate dust, but who could say? She might last forever getting progressively more hideous.

He gazed far out over the water to where the gray Pacific blended into the gray sky. There was one more possibility. Two months ago he could never have considered such an act, but he was not the same person he was two months ago.

He stooped and unclipped the corners of his towel from the anchors. As Marianne turned away for a moment toward the seat he drew one of the steel-pointed spikes from the sand and hefted it. He half-hoped she would turn back and stop him, but she continued to gaze outward. He raised the sand spike high like a dagger and plunged it downward. The point caught Marianne at the crown of her head, just above the knot of grubby red hair. There was a muffled crunch, and the spike sank in easily to the depth of Kyle's fist. It was like stabbing a honey-dew melon.

Marianne did not cry out. Her head bobbed forward under the force of the blow. Kyle snatched his hand away from the shaft of the spike as she started to turn.

"That was stupid," she said. "You can't kill somebody who's already dead." She reached back and with some tugging and twisting, drew out the sand spike. It made a soft sucking noise. She dropped it in the sand and reached again to the back of her head. Her fingers came away sticky with dark viscous fluid. "Now you'll have to get me a hat," she said.

Kyle hugged his bare shoulders and shivered in icy despair. “What is it you want me to do?”

“Take me to Lloyd Gerstner. I’ll do the rest.”

“You want me to go back to Elkhorn City?”

“He isn’t there any more.”

“Then how — ?”

“I have an address for him in Chicago.” She dug into her grubby bag and brought out a crumpled piece of paper. Kyle read a street number on Judson Street, Chicago, written in soft lead pencil.

“I need you to take me there.”

“And then?”

“I told you. I’ll do what I have to do.”

“What about me?”

She put on a grotesque parody of a coquettish smile. “We’ll talk about that when it’s done. One thing, lover …”

“What?”

She turned slowly, and tilted her head back so he could see the round dark hole in her head. A sharp fragment of yellow skull stabbed through the scalp. Black liquid like used motor oil seeped into her hair.

“Don’t do this again.”

Kyle swallowed the sour bile that rose in his throat. She had him. This unnatural creature held his fate in her rotting fingers. He could only surrender and cling to a desperate hope that by performing this last hateful task he might somehow win his freedom.

“I won’t,” he said.

From up the beach two long-legged girls waded around the rocky promontory and headed toward them. They wore high-cut swimsuits in neon colors, one green, one orange. Their laughter was carried before them on the breeze. Kyle grasped Marianne by the arm, feeling the spongy flesh through the sleeve of the raincoat and

the thickness of several sweaters.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get started.”

She stumbled awkwardly through the sand, and together they picked their way up the trail to the road.

“I knew you would help me, lover. Like I said, we’re locked together.”

FIFTEEN

When they reached the top of the trail Kyle picked up the pace, half dragging the girl across the deserted parking lot. At every step he expected someone to call his name.

Hey, Kyle, who's the babe? Whew, what's that smell? She carrying seaweed in that outfit?

How the hell would he ever explain Marianne?

I know she doesn't look too great, and you don't want to get downwind of her, but she can't help it. Dead, you see.

Blessedly, no one was afoot on the road above the secluded beach on this gloomy day. The mismatched couple traversed the parking lot unseen. The sight of his faithful Jeep Wrangler waiting where he had left it cheered him a little.

Kyle got in, making no effort to assist Marianne beyond unlocking the passenger side door from inside. No more points would be awarded for courtesy. Any need for observing etiquette was long gone. And he sure as hell did not want to touch her. She climbed in and sat beside him without comment. He started to buckle up, decided the hell with it, left the seatbelt dangling, and peeled out of the lot.

Once on Pacific Coast Highway he cranked both side windows all the way down. For the first time he regretted not choosing the Sahara model that included the khaki soft top. He kept the Jeep right at the speed limit through light traffic south to Sunset Boulevard, then headed inland to his parents' home in Brentwood. Marianne did not speak during the 30-minute drive, and Kyle gratefully used the respite to invent a story for his parents. He was crazy eager to get this ugly business over with as soon as possible.

That meant little time for explaining the unexplainable before hitting the highway.

He pulled into the driveway of his parents' white neo-Colonial house and stopped.

"Wait here," he said to Marianne.

She gave him a gummy, gap-toothed smile that made his stomach lurch. "What's the matter, lover? Ashamed of me?"

He jerked away from her and hurried inside.

• • •

Valerie Brubaker always pretended she didn't believe it, but took a secret pleasure from hearing people say she couldn't possibly have a 21-year-old son. At 46 Valerie had rich brown hair, maintained without the aid of chemicals. Moisturizers kept her face soft and unlined, and she followed a rigorous aerobics regimen to keep the body firm. She had turned an unused upstairs bedroom into an office from which she conducted her modest real estate business. What had started as a hobby — helping friends find suitable homes — had grown into a profitable part-time profession as she discovered a natural aptitude for the business.

Kyle knocked on the open door before going in.

His mother hit the *Save* key on her computer and turned to smile at him.

"You're home early. Bad surf?"

"No surf. Uh, Mom, something came up."

"Trouble?" Mothers have a sixth sense.

"No, no," he lied quickly. "But I've got a chance to drive up to British Columbia with Brian. He knows these people up there who have a cabin who aren't using it this year, and …" He let the sentence hang, hoping his mother would pick up on it before he spun the story out too thin.

"I thought Brian was in Europe or somewhere with his

parents," she said.

"Oh, yeah, Greece. He, uh, decided not to go." Kyle had never been an adept liar, and lying to his mother caused him physical pain.

"I see. How soon would you be leaving?"

"Well, it would be right away. There's kind of a tight schedule and stuff."

"Oh dear, you mean today?"

"Yeah. Right now, actually."

"Before your father gets home?"

"We want to head out of town before the evening rush clogs the freeway."

"Who's driving?"

"I am. But we'll split the gas."

Mrs. Brubaker frowned, but then relaxed into a fond smile. "I suppose, since this is really your last carefree summer, you might as well do it up right. Do you need any money?"

"Well …"

"Use the MasterCard. Just be sure to keep all your receipts."

"Thanks, Mom."

"And pack some warm clothes."

"I will. Tell Dad goodbye for me. I'll tell you both all about the trip when I get back." He started out the door.

"Wait a minute, when *will* you be back?"

"A week, maybe two. Nothing's definite. I'll let you know."

She stood up and came over to stand facing her son. He had inherited her good bone structure.

"There's nothing wrong, is there, Kyle?"

"Wrong?"

"Just asking. You know, I haven't heard anything from your Uncle Bob since you came back from Wisconsin, and now this sudden trip to Canada …"

He gave her a strong hug. “Nothing’s wrong, Mom. This thing just came up suddenly. Don’t worry.”

He went to his own room and swiftly threw clothes and toilet articles into his bag, feeling like an utter asshole. *Nothing’s wrong, Mom.* The tongue should be ripped out of his mouth for that one. *Everything was* wrong.

No time to think about it now, though. He had to get down to the Jeep and get Marianne the hell out of here before somebody saw her, or she came shambling into the house.

Shuddering at the prospect of his mother encountering the decaying girl, he quickly finished packing, planted a goodbye kiss on his mother’s cheek, and ran out to the Jeep. Marianne was waiting for him.

• • •

Driving east on Sunset Boulevard, before he had even reached the San Diego Freeway, Kyle realized he had no idea how to get from Los Angeles to Chicago. His mind had slid into the lie he told his mother, and he was subliminally planning the fantasy trip up the coast to British Columbia. He desperately wished that were the case, instead of the hellish journey he had before him.

He drove on into Beverly Hills and stopped at an Auto Club office for the necessary maps. A helpful clerk outlined with Magic Marker a route that would take him to San Bernadino, up Interstate 15 through Las Vegas to Salt Lake City. Then east 80 through Wyoming, Nebraska and Iowa to Chicago. Looking down at the fat, yellow-inked path twisting two-thirds of the way across the country he saw a bloated graveyard worm. Shivering, he gathered up the maps and left the counter.

“Enjoy your trip,” the clerk called after him.

Kyle could only groan.

• • •

"Do you have a gun?"

Kyle froze halfway into the Jeep. "Gun?"

"You know, bang bang, you're dead."

"No, I don't have a gun."

"You'd better get one."

"Why?"

She reached across the seat with a gray, scaly hand and stroked his face. "Because I'm asking you to, lover. And you want to keep me happy."

How the hell did you go about buying a gun? Kyle had paid little attention to the political flap about gun control. He had never fired a gun in his life. Never expected to. Guns were for police and the juvenile gangs that infested Los Angeles.

He found the O-K Corral Gunshop on Western Avenue in the gritty end of Hollywood. Iron gratings that folded across the front of the store told him what the neighborhood was like.

Under the heavy glass counter top lay a deadly looking array of revolvers and semi-automatic pistols. A clerk in checked shirt and string tie sauntered over.

"Help you?"

"I'm, uh, looking for a gun."

"We got 'em. Have anything special in mind?"

Kyle peered down at the deadly little weapons. He tapped the glass above a smooth looking number that reminded him of something James Bond might carry.

"How about this one?"

The clerk unlocked the rear of the cabinet, reached in, and brought out the pistol. "Nice little weapon. Walther PP three-eighty. Holds seven rounds in the magazine, one in the chamber. Comes with an extra magazine."

“How much is it?”

“Reconditioned police trade-in, I can let you have it for $349.99.”

“That much?”

“This is a precision piece of West German machinery, friend. They do not come cheap.”

“Do you take MasterCard?”

“Sure. Happy to.”

While Kyle dug into his wallet for the credit card. He could worry about explaining the purchase later. The clerk reached under the counter and brought up a triplicate form.

“Just fill this out, and we’ll let you know when you can come in and pick up the piece.”

“You’ll let me know?”

“Usually takes about three weeks for the state to okay it.”

“Three weeks? I need it right now.”

The clerk returned the Walther to the showcase and relocked the sliding door in back. “No can do. You know how touchy they are these days about the handgun business.”

Kyle fingered the bills in his wallet. He had about a hundred dollars in cash. “Maybe if I added something to the price?”

“No way, pal. If the boss thought I was doing business on my own I’d be outta here so fast my head would swim.”

Kyle’s heart sank. At least he had tried. Maybe when he explained Marianne would forget about the gun.

“Wait a minute.”

Kyle turned back. The clerk looked around the store to assure himself there were no other customers. “How much cash you got?”

“About a hundred dollars.”

“No way you can touch a piece like this one, but I’ve got a little peashooter in the back room I could let you have. It’s not registered, no questions asked.”

“I’ll take it.”

The gun was a short-barreled .22-caliber revolver with a scarred wooden handgrip and a cylinder that felt loose. The clerk threw in half a box of .22 long rifle cartridges and hurried Kyle out of the store.

As he walked up Western Avenue to where he had parked the Jeep Kyle wondered what it would be like to take the little gun out of the plastic bag, load the cylinder, put the muzzle to the side of his head and pull the trigger. Would he feel anything? Would there be any last thoughts before the bullet burrowed into his brain? Would there be anything afterward? At least he would then be free of the ghastly Marianne.

But even as he conjured the image he knew he could not do it. With his luck he would botch the job, blow away some vital portion of his brain, and live on as a drooling vegetable. No, he would have to find another escape. There had to be one. Didn’t there?

He climbed into the Jeep and passed the package to Marianne. She gave the .22 a cursory look and dropped it into her bag along with the bullets.

“Not much of a gun, but it will have to do,” she said. “Now let’s get going.”

SIXTEEN

It was early afternoon when Kyle pulled onto the Hollywood Freeway at Western Avenue and headed southeast across the four-level interchange. The traffic was moderate where in a couple of hours it would be bumper-to-bumper with homeward bound commuters. He turned east on the San Bernardino Freeway. Ironically, the sun chose that moment to break through the overcast and shine down benevolently to mock his mood.

Once they had made it past San Bernardino Kyle floored the accelerator and the Jeep flew over the long straight stretches of Interstate 15 through the California desert, barely slowing down as he bypassed Victorville and Barstow. He had no fear of being stopped by the California Highway Patrol. A speeding ticket would be a minor irritation compared to his larger troubles.

He kept the windows all the way down and his eyes straight ahead. He tuned the radio to whatever heavy rock station was receivable and cranked the volume to the max to blast unwelcome images out of his head.

At Baker he pulled into a Chevron station for gas and to use the rest room. He bought a billed cap with a Marlboro logo to cover the ugly hole in the back of Marianne's head. She took the cap without comment and put it on.

His stomach growled, reminding him that he had not eaten since breakfast, and that had been a quick cup of instant coffee and a muffin before he left for the beach. It was now after six and he was hungry. He spoke his first words to Marianne since they left the gun shop in Hollywood.

"You hungry?"

She pulled the Marlboro hat down low and looked at him with flat, dead eyes. “I don’t eat.”

His own appetite faded. Still, he went into a convenience store next to the gas station and bought a bag of tortilla chips and a Hershey bar.

At the Nevada border night lay ahead of them in the east while the horizon behind still glowed with the sunset. Kyle polished off the last of the chips and the chocolate and tossed the wrappers out the window to pollute the desert. He wished he had thought to buy a Coke too.

Marianne sat like a wax figure in the seat next to him. A wax figure seriously in need of restoration. From time to time he glanced over at her, only to look quickly away when the headlights of an oncoming car illuminated her face under the bill of the cap.

Las Vegas flowed past on both sides of the highway, an island of glitter in the black desert sea. Kyle remembered the happier trips he had made to the gambling city. Once with his parents, half-a-dozen times with friends. He recalled the lacquered look of the women, the watchful eyes of the pit bosses. It all seemed like another life. This time the city was a meaningless cluster of neon that he put behind him as swiftly as possible.

The desert at night is a cold and lonely place. Seen from a speeding car it is a vast blackness relieved only by the lights of scattered dwellings. Part of Kyle’s mind wondered how people could live like that, isolated beyond any reasonable limit. Another part of his mind reminded him that at this moment he would gladly change places with any of those unseen lonely people.

He stopped outside of Cedar City to refill the tank and use the bathroom. He found an Automatic Teller Machine where his MasterCard would work and withdrew two hundred dollars. He let Marianne wait in the Jeep while he bolted a Cheese Whopper in Burger King and washed it down with two cups of black coffee.

Back on the road and into the desert night. Mile after mile of pavement hummed under the Jeep's nubby tires. The minutes and hours clicked inexorably away on the digital dashboard clock. The only stations he could get on the radio were a country western yowler and an unctuous Christian couple telling him where to mail his offering. He regretted not grabbing a handful of tapes before he left, but at the time all he wanted to do was get moving.

At some point before dawn he began to hallucinate. Ghostly forms flitted across the highway in front of him. Once he hit the brakes hard enough to send Marianne's head banging into the dash panel. She looked at him without expression and said nothing.

Finally he had to fight to keep his eyes open. His shoulders and arms ached from driving, his fingers cramped into claws around the steering wheel. The second time the Jeep drifted to the shoulder of the road at 80 mph, he knew he'd had it for this night.

"I've got to get some sleep," he muttered through cracked lips.

"Go ahead," she told him. "I'll wake you when it's time to go."

He found a dusty two-lane road that led off into the desert. At a wide spot he turned off, killed the lights and the engine, closed his eyes and tried to will himself to sleep. No good. Now his eyes would not stay closed. The morning sun stabbed into the Jeep, and without the rush of air through the windows, the smell of Marianne made him gag. He would have to find a bed. With every muscle aching, every nerve protesting, he fired the engine and drove back onto the highway.

Passing up a TravelLodge and a Holiday Inn, he pulled into a dusty clump of cabins called the Desert Flower Motor Hotel. He asked for a room with two beds, registered as Mr. and Mrs. George Romero, and took Marianne inside. He pulled the blinds, turned the air conditioner up full, stripped to his skivvies, and fell into the bed nearest the blower. Marianne sat in a chair throughout the rest of the morning, staring at something only she could see.

Kyle awoke with a jolt and a moment's terror of *Where the hell am I?* Too soon he remembered. Marianne sat where he had last seen her, watching him. The atmosphere was foul despite the air conditioner. He groped his wristwatch from the night stand, read *10:05*, and piled out of bed.

He washed quickly, no time for a shower or shave. In a truck stop café he wolfed a plate of scrambled eggs, sausage, and home fries, drinking as much black coffee as he could swallow. Marianne, as always, sat silently waiting in the Jeep.

He filled the tank and dug back onto the highway. They sailed past a town called Spanish Forks. A radio time signal told him they were now in the mountain time zone. With his watch adjusted it was 11 a.m. Tuesday. Chicago was still far away.

By noon they reached Salt Lake City. Kyle did not linger. Throughout the state of Utah he had imagined the clean-living Mormons staring at the California Jeep with the unshaven young man and the decomposing girl and shaking their heads in righteous disapproval.

Under other circumstances he would have enjoyed immensely the spectacular vistas of Wyoming. But on this cheerless journey the majestic mountains, the surging rivers, the unspoiled forests were nothing more than generic scenery to put behind him.

He made it through Cheyenne and across the flat expanse of Nebraska to North Platte before exhaustion forced him into another anonymous motel. He remembered to set his watch for the central time zone. It was 2:50 a.m., Wednesday, when he fell dirty and exhausted into bed.

He had barely closed his eyes when he was awakened by something moving next to him. He jerked erect and back against the headboard in horror when he realized it was the moldering body of Marianne snuggling close to him.

"Jesus, what are you doing?"

She turned her face to him, made more ghastly by the light of a flickering blue neon sign outside the window.

"I can still do it, you know."

His stomach lurched. "Oh, God, Marianne …"

She grasped his limp member. He pulled violently away.

"But apparently you can't."

"Hell no, I can't." He rolled out onto the floor and stumbled to the other bed. "What do you expect?"

"You're not much fun, you know that?"

"Fun? *Fun?!* Are you crazy?"

"No, lover, I'm dead. Remember?"

"Leave me alone, can't you? I've got to sleep."

Several times before daylight he awoke shouting and brushing frantically at his body. Marianne sat now in a chair across the room.

At 10 a.m. they were underway again. Kyle tanked up on black coffee and bought a bottle of caffeine pills in a drug store. He vowed not to sleep again until they reached Chicago.

They bypassed Omaha and crossed the Missouri River into Iowa at five in the afternoon. The water towers and not much else of the small towns were visible from the interstate. Kyle stopped only when absolutely necessary for fuel or bathroom purposes, or for a quick sandwich and more black coffee.

They skirted Des Moines to the north and Davenport to the south and rolled on across the Mississippi River. Kyle's eyelids were crusted, his nerves jangling from coffee and pills, but with his goal just over three hours away, nothing short of a brick wall was going to stop him.

When they entered Illinois at Moline, Kyle felt they were almost there, even though the entire state lay between him and Chicago. He drove with a crazed intensity through Joliet, a name he associated with prison. It was not an image he wanted to hold right now.

He turned north on 57 and angled toward Lake Michigan through the suburbs of Oak Forest, Markham, Harvey, Riverdale, and Blue Island. At the first motel sign visible from the expressway he pulled it off. In the office he rented a room, not bothering to use an alias, and bought a map of Chicago. He took the map to the room, spread it out on the bed, and fell asleep squinting at the small print of the street names.

The cleaning woman awakened him at noon to tell him it was checkout time. He looked wildly around for Marianne, saw the bathroom door closed, and told the woman he would be out in five minutes.

While Marianne stood silently watching, he returned his attention to the map of Chicago. After some hunting, he found Judson Street. It ran in broken sections like a chopped-up snake across the south side of the city. He deposited Marianne in the Jeep and took the map with him when he went into the office to return the key. A fat Arabic looking man with a sooty moustache was working the desk.

Kyle pointed out on the map the section of Judson Street that would include the address Marianne had written down. “Can you tell me how to get there from here?”

The man peered at the map, then up at Kyle. His irises were so dark his eyes seemed to have no pupils. “You sure you want to go there?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

The clerk shrugged, ridding himself of any responsibility for this young man’s actions. He took a ballpoint pen from his pocket and traced a route up the Dan Ryan Expressway past the University of Chicago and off before 35th Street and Comiskey Park. He inked a heavy “X” in a crosshatch of streets where one broken section of Judson lay. Kyle folded up the map and left.

He drove slowly with the map spread out on his lap, following

the route marked by the desk clerk. Beside him Marianne sat leaning forward, her sunken eyes scanning the Expressway as though she might spy Lloyd Gerstner walking along the shoulder. When Kyle steered the Jeep down into the neighborhood "X"ed on the map it was like driving into a garbage dump.

There were as many graffiti-scarred, boarded-up store fronts as there were shops open for business. Bottles, rags, scum, and bums littered the street. The Jeep with its California plates and weird occupants drew hard, hostile stares from the dark-skinned people who drifted aimlessly along the sidewalks or stood in clusters at the corners of the mean streets.

The segment of Judson Street that lay here was meaner than most. The fading light of late afternoon did not make it lovelier. Stripped and gutted cars lined the curb. The fronts of the old buildings were blackened with layers of grime, the windows opaque. The address Marianne had for Lloyd Gerstner was a sooty five-story brick that might, in the forgotten past, have been a townhouse. A faded cardboard sign in a downstairs window read: *ROOMS FOR RENT*.

"There it is," Kyle said.

"I know," said Marianne in the terrible rasp that her voice had become.

"Are you going in?"

"That's what I came for."

"Do you want me to wait for you?" *Please, please say no*.

"No. I won't need you for this."

Kyle drew a great sigh of blessed relief that he tried to hide. He reached across to open the door on her side, being careful not to come in contact with the pulpy flesh.

Bony fingers clutched his arm and squeezed with inhuman strength.

"But don't try to run away from me, lover. You know I'll find

you. I'll always find you."

The words were a knife in his heart, all the more painful because he knew they were true. He ground the Jeep into gear and drove off without looking back. He turned several corners aimlessly, finally parking across from a black-painted window with a flickering green neon tube in the shape of a lizard. The lettering read: Salamander Lounge.

Kyle got out of the Jeep and exchanged icy stares with two husky black men who leaned against the wall next to the Salamander.

Go ahead, jump me. Nobody can do more to me than I've done to myself.

The silent men watched him with hooded eyes, but made no move to impede him.

The interior of the Salamander Lounge smelled like a toilet. So accustomed was Kyle to the odor of rot, that he barely noticed. The lighting was dim to the point of gloom. The patrons were indistinguishable from the derelicts who shuffled along the street outside. Grimy hands, unshaven faces, ragged clothes, and narrow, nervous eyes. None of them paid much attention, and Kyle realized with a jolt that after his marathon drive across the country he looked like one of them.

"Beer," he told the bartender, a black man with the upper torso of a pro lineman.

"What kind?"

"Whatever you got."

"Two dollars." He waited until Kyle had fished out the change and laid it on the bar before heading for the cooler. He brought back a can of Old Milwaukee. "You need a glass?"

Kyle shook his head. He popped the can and tilted it to his lips. The beer was cold and good and went down with a bite. He set the can down and belched.

“Excuse me,” he said, purely by reflex. Nobody paid any attention.

A movement reflected in the streaky mirror behind the bar caught his eye. He turned. In the doorway stood the frail Gypsy boy from the carnival.

“Hey!” he called.

The boy wheeled and disappeared.

Leaving his beer unfinished, Kyle pushed away from the bar and ran to the doorway. He reached the sidewalk in time to see the boy dart into an alley several doors away. With no time to cross the street and get the Jeep turned around, Kyle pounded after him.

The alley was an obstacle course of trash cans, cartons, broken packing crates, makeshift bedrolls. A rat scuttled from a clutter of cans as Kyle crashed through them. The Gypsy boy, fleet as a deer, vanished down the next street. Breathing hard, Kyle reached the far end of the alley. He ran down the sidewalk in the direction the boy had gone, but slowed as he saw the many dark doorways and air shafts, with another alley ahead.

He jogged to a stop. What the hell was he chasing the kid for, anyway? Just a crazy impulse. He fucking sure didn’t need more grief from the Gypsy. With hands jammed in his pockets he plodded back in the direction from which he had come.

SEVENTEEN

In a second floor room of the building on Judson Street Lloyd Gerstner tilted a pint bottle of Jim Beam to his mouth. He swallowed, coughed, and held the bottle up at eye level to gauge how much was left. Half an inch. Not enough to save. He tossed it off and let go a fiery belch. He wiped his lips with the back of one hand and set the bottle down unsteadily on the cracked glass top of the bureau. His image looked back at him from the mirror — square-faced, heavy-jowled, pig-eyed, unshaven. And scared.

Yes, dammit, scared. Lloyd Gerstner, who would back down a tavern full of farmers, lift a cow off the ground, and bend a fireplace poker in his bare hands was scared shitless. Well, who the fuck wouldn't be worried after what happened to his brothers? Fabian skewered like a belly-hooked bluegill, Jesse strangled with his own belt while he shit his pants. Anybody who wasn't scared after that was a damn fool.

Lloyd looked around sourly at the room he rented for a price that could get you a damn nice apartment back home. A real dump. Nobody in his right mind would stay in this crappy flophouse on the crappiest street in Chicago without a damn good reason.

Wanting to stay alive, Lloyd figured, was a damn good reason. Which didn't make it any easier to stay here. After two weeks he knew every flower in the motheaten rug, every crack in the ceiling, every cobweb in the unreachable corners, and every leak in the stinking toilet. His little three-room apartment over Buck Hutchinson's garage in Elkhorn City was no Taj Mahal, but alongside this shithole it looked pretty damn good.

He walked to the bathroom, urinated, spat into the toilet,

flushed it. He jiggled the handle so the stupid thing wouldn't run forever. He went back to the other room, flattened himself against the wall to peek through the window at Judson Street below. The usual hoods and winos and junkies wandered aimlessly along the sidewalk. Automobile traffic was minimal. Nobody with any sense drove down Judson Street.

He was getting hungry. He was going to have to go out soon to get some food. There was a little stand three blocks away where the guy sold hot dogs you could eat without puking. Lloyd was always careful to go in the daylight. Even then he kept looking behind him. The local hoods weren't going to bother a big guy like Lloyd Gerstner, but it wasn't the local hoods he was worried about.

That was the hell of it. He didn't know *what* he was afraid of. But there sure as fuck was somebody or something out there that had it in for the Gerstner brothers. Two down and one to go. He was alone now, with nobody to help him.

The idea of asking for help was a riot. The sheriff back in Elkhorn City would never lift a finger to help one of the Gerstners. Neither would anybody else. If they took a vote of the citizens, they'd probably go in favor of whoever was killing Gerstners. No, his only hope was to run.

Lloyd sat down to pull on his socks. They were the same crusty sweat socks he had worn since moving in. After he got a look at Jesse's body he'd bailed out of town without much thought to packing. He shoved his feet into the old sneakers that were stiff with some kind of crud he'd stepped in. Lloyd had never been much of a dresser, not like the dapper Jesse, but now he gave even less of a shit what clothes he put on. Somebody was out to kill him, that was the only thing that made any difference in Lloyd Gerstner's drunken world. Some sonofabitch had done his two brothers, and Lloyd had not the least doubt that he was next on the list.

Somebody rapped softly on the door. The sudden sound

startled him like a rattle of gunfire.

"Whozzat?"

"Pizza delivery." The voice was muffled. He couldn't tell whether it was male or female.

"I didn't order no pizza."

"I got this address. This room number."

"You messed up. This is the wrong place."

"It's paid for, and I gotta deliver it. Sausage and mushroom, thick crust."

Saliva flowed into Lloyd's mouth. Shit, he was hungry and the thing was paid for, and he didn't much want to go out. His eyes narrowed slyly.

"Leave it outside the door."

"You got it."

There was scuffing sound as of something being placed on the floor out in the hall, and footsteps receding and fading away. Lloyd placed his ear to the wood panel, held his breath and listened.

Silence.

He opened the door.

Nothing on the bare wood except dirt in the cracks. Nobody down the hall toward the stairway. In the other direction … oh, *shit!*

"Hello Lloyd."

The voice was like rusty nails pulling out of rotten wood. The body was a pile of rags. The face … oh, God, the face was something out of hell. The skin was swollen and cracked. Greasy spikes of reddish hair hung down out of a goofy cap with Marlboro on it. The eyes were dark little points of fire deep in shadowed caves of flesh.

"Remember me?"

"No!"

But he did. God help him, he did remember. Marianne Avery,

cute as a newborn colt and perky as a squirrel had somehow turned into this hideous moldering hag. And the stink of her!

He took a backward step into the room and reached for the door.

"Don't."

From somewhere in the folds of her grimy clothing she produced a gun. Just a little tiny gun, but real. Lloyd pulled his hand away from the door and backed into the room as she gestured with the revolver. She came in and kicked the door shut behind her.

"Sit down, Lloyd. We've got things to talk about."

Lloyd began to regain some of his lost confidence. Hell, it was just a woman, sicker than shit from the look of her, with a little bitty popgun.

"Sit," she said again.

"Like hell I will," he said.

Marianne sighted down the short barrel of the .22 and shot him in the knee.

Lloyd screamed and clutched at the wound. Blood leaked out between his fingers. He stumbled back until he hit the soiled bed and sat down hard.

"That's better. Now shut up or I'll shoot off the other knee."

She was crazy. Sick with some terrible disease and crazy as a coot. Lloyd clamped his jaws together, though he continued to moan at the fiery pain of his shattered knee. He knew this building well enough to know that sounds like screams and gunshots were routinely ignored. If he could just hold together, maybe he would get a chance to grab this nut case and throw her out the window.

"I want you to lie back on the bed now, Lloyd." The tone was level and reasonable, but the rasp of the voice gave the order a sinister urgency.

Lloyd did as he was told. From somewhere in the heap of rags she wore the crone pulled out a roll of a metallic duct tape.

“Now spread your arms up over your head and take hold of the bedstead.”

“Wait a minute — ”

She leveled the pistol.

“Okay, okay,” he said quickly, and obeyed. He gripped the cold metal bars on each side hard to take his mind off the pain in his shattered knee.

“That’s a good boy.”

She laid the gun down on the night stand and began taping his left wrist to the bedstead. This was the opportunity he was waiting for. Lloyd rolled toward her and grasped a bony arm with his free right hand. She squeezed with impossible strength until the bones of his forearm crackled. When he cried out she flung his damaged arm back to the other side of the bed.

“Don’t try that again or I’ll really hurt you.”

Lloyd Gerstner, 240 pounds of bully who had intimidated grown men since he was 10 years old, lay back on the crumpled sheets and let this stinking crone tape his wrists and his ankles to the corners of the bed so he lay spreadeagled and helpless.

“W-what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to have some fun with you, Lloyd, just like you did with me that night in your van. Remember?”

She reached across his body and almost tenderly unzipped the fly of his Wrangler jeans. She slipped cold fingers inside and brought out his penis, limp and thick as a hunk of tow rope.

“Remember what you made me do with this, Lloyd? You made me kiss the dirty end of it. You made me put it in my mouth.” She squeezed him. He tried to close his eyes, but there was a terrible fascination in what was happening to him, and he had to watch.

Marianne reached again into the folds of her garments. This time she pulled out a heavy bladed skinning knife. “Now it’s your turn to kiss it, Lloyd. Kiss it goodbye.”

She pulled his shriveled member taut and brought the blade of the knife to its root.

"Oh, no, Jesus, no!" He was screaming now, screaming for someone, anyone, to help him. Nobody did.

Marianne smiled, showing scaly teeth and a black maw. She kept her eyes on Lloyd's face as she began to saw back and forth with the blade.

The pain was like nothing he had ever imagined. Lloyd Gerstner babbled in a language only the gods would understand. He begged for deliverance, unconsciousness, death. The gods did not answer him for a long, long time.

• • •

Ten blocks away from the rooming house where Lloyd Gerstner screamed away his life, a tall, lean man with shadowed eyes in a dark face sat in a back booth of Czerny's Authentic Hungarian Restaurant. By the pale light of a sputtering candle he studied the faces of a deck of cards as he laid them out one by one in an intricate pattern.

At the front of the restaurant the door burst open and the Gypsy boy ran in past the huge woman who tended the cash register. He ran to the back booth and stopped short. He shifted impatiently from foot to foot as he waited for the man to finish with the cards.

"What is it?" he said when at last he looked up.

"He is here, the yellow-haired one who helped me on the street."

The Gypsy looked long at his son before he spoke. "Here? That is not good."

"I saw him. He tried to follow me, but I got away."

Dorando gathered the cards, shuffled them, cut the stack twice toward himself. He picked them up in reverse order and laid out

four cards in a square. Immediately he slapped the deck down on the tabletop and rose.

“There is work for me tonight. I want you to stay here with Mama Czerny.”

The boy looked up into the somber eyes of his father and nodded. He watched the tall Gypsy stride out the door.

EIGHTEEN

Kyle stumbled back through the garbage-choked alleys and the sooty streets, not really caring where he was headed. What could he have been thinking of chasing the Gypsy boy through these strange Chicago streets? His mind was not working right. What would he have done if he had caught the kid? What was there to say? A waste of energy. A waste of his life.

Somehow he made it back to the street with the Salamander Lounge. Down the block his Jeep sat on the opposite side of the street. A chunky youth wearing a Chicago Bulls jacket worked with a lug wrench on one of the 5-spoke alloy wheels. The right side door was open, and a pair of Air Jordans waggled over the sidewalk as their owner busied himself on the interior. A tall juvenile with Geri-Curled hair, also in a Bulls jacket, stood in front of the Jeep with his arms folded.

A fury totally out of proportion to the situation boiled up inside Kyle. He broke into a run. The tall boy and the one working at the wheel looked up at his approach.

"What do you think you're doing?"

The tall youth surveyed him coolly. "Hey, man, this your Jeep?"

"You Goddamn right it's mine."

The squat youth stood up holding the lug wrench. The boy lying across the front seat backed out. He was holding the cassette deck. Wires dangled from the deck like severed tendons.

The boy holding the wrench and the one with the deck looked to the tall one.

"Man here say this his Jeep. That right, man?"

“Put it back.”

“Say what?”

“Put the deck back in the car.”

The tall one struck a pose with his hands raised in mock alarm. “Whoa, you hear what the man say?”

The boy with the cassette deck spoke up. “I hear him, but I don’t believe him.”

The other one smacked one end of the lug wrench against his broad palm.

“Hey, man, my boys don’t think this really your Jeep. What you think we should do?”

“Put the deck back in the car,” Kyle said levelly.

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll kill you.”

Kyle planted his feet and tensed for their attack. He was ready, eager even, for physical combat. For so long he had been so helpless that he craved battle, even though he recognized his chances of surviving here against three of them in unfriendly territory were not good. He had nothing to look forward to anyway.

The tall youth watched him soberly while the others shifted to either side of him. The one still holding the tape deck looked to the leader for a signal. The silent youth with the lug wrench raised it to shoulder level and took a step toward Kyle.

He felt a wild intoxication beyond anything he had ever achieved on artificial stimulants. His nerve ends tingled with anticipation of the coming clash. He looked from side to side, meeting the eyes of each of the three youths.

“Come on,” he said. “You want some of me, come on and get it.”

The boy with the wrench took another step toward him. The tall one motioned him back with a hand signal. He took a deep look into Kyle’s eyes.

“Chill, man. We don’t want nothin’ you got.” To the stocky one he said, “Put the deck back.”

“Say what?”

“Do it.”

“Put it back?”

“Yeah.”

The youth obeyed, setting the loose tape deck gently on the front seat of the jeep, leaving the door ajar. At another signal from the leader, the three of them backed slowly away from Kyle. When they reached the corner they began laughing and punching each other, and disappeared up the cross street.

Kyle felt let down. Deflated. He had probably come within five seconds of being killed, but he was disappointed. He had been robbed of the power to control his destiny. He kicked the door of the Jeep closed and shuffled across the street to the Salamander Lounge.

The sad collection of customers had not changed. They might have been wax figures in some depressing display. The bartender gave no sign of recognition.

“Something?”

“Beer. No, whiskey.”

“Want to make up your mind?”

“Whiskey. Double.” Kyle had never been a drinker of hard liquor, but in recent weeks had changed in many ways.

“Any special brand?”

“Whatever you’re pouring.”

“Four dollars.”

Kyle fished through his pocket, found two bills, a ten and a twenty. He laid the twenty on the bar. The bartender picked it up, held it into the light, then brought the change and a generous double shot of cheap blended whiskey.

Kyle swallowed and closed his eyes as the liquor hit his empty

stomach. He breathed deeply, imaging he could feel the alcohol coursing through his veins to his brain. There was a quiet ringing in his ears. He opened his eyes to see the bartender watching him. The man exhaled through his nose and sidled away down the bar.

After his second double whiskey, Kyle thought he was going to be sick. He stumbled back to the men's room and leaned over the brown-streaked toilet. His stomach lurched and he tasted bile, but the wave of nausea passed. He splashed water on his face and used the filthy roller towel to dry it.

When he dropped the towel the Kyle Brubaker who looked back at him from the mirror was far different from the carefree college boy from the beaches of California. This Kyle Brubaker was older. A lot older. There were purplish smears under his eyes and creases from the flare of his nostrils to the corners of his downturned mouth. His tangled blond hair had not recently known a comb. He needed a shave.

"You're a mess," Kyle told his image.

The reflection did not respond.

He wandered back out and reclaimed his barstool. He signaled for a refill. The bartender extracted four dollars from the change lying on the bar and poured him another.

A toothless old woman with the smooth skin of a girl came in through the door. She surveyed the customers and walked over to Kyle. She tugged his arm for attention.

"Help a person out, dear? I got no place to stay."

"Go away," he muttered.

The woman sighed, turned from him, and started toward the door.

Kyle looked after her. "Wait a minute."

"Me?"

"Yeah."

Warily the woman came back. Kyle pulled the crumpled ten

from the bills on the bar and handed it to her. She took it and checked the denomination in surprise.

"Good luck to *you*, friend," she said, and hurried out with the bill before he could change his mind.

Kyle finished his third drink. His head pounded behind his eyeballs. He had to squint to keep things from slipping out of his range of vision. His thinking grew sluggish. Good. That's what he wanted. No thinking. He beckoned to the bartender.

"Hello, lover."

The familiar hoarse whisper rasped his nerves like sandpaper.

"Lonesome?"

"You found me."

"I told you I would."

He stared at her, fascinated in spite of himself by something that seemed to be wriggling under the flesh of her cheek. "You won't go away, will you?"

"One more favor, honey. Do one more thing for me and that's it. I won't need you any more."

A tiny hope flickered, then died in alcohol haze and despair.

"I don't believe you."

The bartender came over. "Something for your …"

Marianne turned her ruined face toward the man and he stopped in mid sentence.

"Nothing," Kyle said.

The bartender left them hastily.

"I promise, lover," said Marianne. "One more favor and it's over."

"You *promise?"* Kyle's bitter laugh turned into a cough. He spat into his handkerchief.

"Try me. What have you got to lose?"

"Now? There's nothing left to lose."

"So you see?"

“What do you want me to do?”

“Drive me back to Bischoff.”

“What for?”

“It’s my home.”

“I thought you didn’t want me to go back there.”

“I do now.”

She started to smile at him but her mouth would not work right. She reached in with a thumb and forefinger and grasped one of her molars. A little twist and the tooth came out in her fingers. She held it up for him to inspect, blackish fluid dripping from the double root.

Across from them the bartender grunted and looked away. Kyle saw the shabby waxwork customers were alert now, staring at the moldering Marianne and the tooth she had just pulled from her mouth.

He scooped up the money remaining on the bar. “Let’s get out of here.”

With Marianne walking jerkily at his side he crossed to the Jeep. From the corner the three boys in the Bulls jackets watched silently.

Kyle got in and tossed the loose tape deck into the back. Marianne flopped into the seat beside him. The smell was bad, but the whiskey clouded his senses enough so he could stand it.

“You found the other brother? Lloyd?”

“I found him.”

“Did you … did you? …”

“I cut his cock off and made him eat it.”

Kyle groaned.

“He didn’t like the taste of it any more than I did. He died trying to spit it out.”

“Oh, Jesus, Marianne …”

“You didn’t see what he and his brothers did to me in the van

that night. What he made me do."

"So you killed them. You killed them all."

"At least they're really dead. They don't have to walk around with parts falling off." She pinched the edge of the blackened gash on the underside of her forearm and pulled. The flesh came away in a ragged strip half an inch wide. The meat underneath was black and oozing.

Kyle turned his head away. He knocked the Jeep's door open just in time to vomit out onto the street. He retched and puked until nothing but a thin yellow bile came up. When he sank back behind the wheel he was pale and sweating.

Marianne looked at him. One of her eyeballs rotated slowly, sickeningly down so he was left looking at a bulging, bloodshot white.

"If you're through, can we go now?"

Angrily Kyle fired the engine, smacked the stick into gear, and took off with a shriek of rubber.

NINETEEN

He didn't bother with the map. On a journey to hell you don't much care how you get there. Ignoring traffic lights and speed limits Kyle blundered through the streets of Chicago's south side until he found his way onto an expressway. Then he just kept driving until the big green and white signs directed him north on 94 to Milwaukee. He drove with a total lack of caution, accelerator to the floor, whipping from lane to lane, blasting the horn at anyone who was slow getting out of his way. From somewhere in the front end of the jeep a vibration began. He ignored it and sped on.

There was no reaction from Marianne. She sat beside him, a foul-smelling bundle of rags and moldering flesh. Her eyes, he thanked God, were so deeply shadowed they were invisible. Her thoughts were unknowable.

It was after nine o'clock, the night was cold and starless when they hit Milwaukee. Kyle pulled off the highway only long enough to refuel, piled back into the Jeep and drove grimly on, following signs directing him to Fond Du Lac and Appleton.

By the time he left the divided highway north of Lake Winnebago, Kyle's head was pounding from his unaccustomed intake of alcohol and lack of sleep. His muscles screamed from fatigue. He was seeing four headlights for each approaching car. A fog that was only in his mind obscured long patches of road. The thumping vibration of the Jeep got worse.

"You're driving on the wrong side of the road," Marianne whispered hoarsely. It was her first comment since they left Chicago.

"Who gives a shit." The slurred sound of his own words

surprised him. Shaking his head in an attempt to clear the fog, he steered the Jeep back over to the right.

"You really think you're being used badly, don't you," she said.

He cackled wildly in near hysteria. "Used badly? Oh, no. Hell no. All you've done is blackmail me into hauling you all over the country so you can kill people. You've only messed up my life and stolen my future, that's all. Used badly? Where would I get a crazy idea like that?"

Marianne shifted in the seat to face him. He could feel the unblinking gaze of her one working eye. With chilling intensity she said, "You listen to me, lover. I had a life too. I was every bit as happy with mine as you were with yours. I had a nice home, parents who loved me, a good guy who wanted to marry me. I had a future too. I lost all that in one night because I went out with you."

He groped for a defense, but his clouded mind would not come up with one. "Hey, it was an accident. I didn't roll the car on purpose."

"I'm not talking about the accident," she said. "Accidents can't be helped. It's what you did to me afterwards. I was dead. D-e-a-d, you understand? I can see you don't like talking about it. Well, neither do I. It's a hateful idea. But it happened to me. It happens to everybody, right? So I was dead, and whatever it is that happens afterward was going to happen to me. I never got a chance to find out what that was, because you, you and that filthy Gypsy brought me back." She ripped off the Marlboro cap, pulled back the stringy red hair on both sides of her head, and thrust her ruined face close to his. "Back to *this*."

"I didn't know what he was going to do," Kyle said. "I went a little crazy when I saw you lying there and I couldn't hear any heartbeat. I didn't know what I was saying."

"Bullshit!" The expletive was a lash across his face. "You knew

exactly what you were saying. And the Gypsy did exactly what you asked him to. Bring her back, you told him. *Bring her back!* Well, he did it, Kyle. He brought me back. Here I am."

She leaned closer to him. He felt the cold rubbery lips on his ear, the crusted tongue. The stink of rot brought tears to his eyes. "And I'm *yours!*"

He jerked violently away. "Don't!"

"You asked for me to be brought back, and now you don't want me. That's no way to be."

"Stop it, Marianne."

Her voice deepened into a growl. "But you didn't do it for me, did you, Kyle? You didn't give one little fuck about me. You had that Gypsy bring me back to save your own sweet ass, didn't you. It would have been inconvenient for you if I was killed in an accident and you were driving with a skin full of whiskey. That's what you were thinking of, and that's *all* you were thinking of. Why you might even have had to go to jail. To save yourself you did this to me. Look over here at what you did, Kyle. *Look!"*

Slowly he turned his head, taking his eyes from the road to look at the girl. One eye stared fiercely. The other was like the bottom end of an overripe hardboiled egg. With a grimy thumb and two fingers she took hold of her upper lip and pulled. As he watched in horror the rotting flesh of the lip stretched and ripped away with a sucking sound, exposing her upper teeth and mottled gums. She held the scrap of lip before him like a dead minnow and grinned in a death's head grimace.

"Ssseee what I can do." The bared teeth gave her a lisp to go with the growly voice.

Kyle groaned from the depths of his soul. He snapped his eyes back front just in time to keep from swerving off the pavement.

He drove grimly onward through the night, the pavement wavering to his blurred vision like the surface of a pond. The

thumping vibration increased and the steering wheel felt sluggish in his grip. Dark shapes burst from the shadowy trees at the side of the road only to dissolve into fragments as he plowed the Jeep into them. He recognized the onset of delirium, but the knowledge did nothing to make the shapes less real.

Sleep. God, how he wanted to sleep. Just close his eyes, let his head drop, and find oblivion. He could sleep for days. Then when he woke up he would find this was all a dream. Everything. Marianne, the Gerstner brothers, the Gypsy, the rot. In the bright golden light of morning the nightmare would quickly fade from his unconsciousness and he would be back in California, on the beach, with his buddies.

His head jerked up in a reflex action. It was not morning, he was not in California, and none of this was a dream. He squeezed the leather-wrapped steering wheel, breathed in the stench of rotted flesh, and let the tears roll unchecked down into the stubble of his beard. This had to be the bottom of the pit. Nothing could be worse than this. Nothing.

The headlights of the Jeep picked out a pale shape far up ahead in the road. Blocking the road. Not one shape. Three. Three human shapes. Coming toward him. Fabian Gerstner, obscenely naked with a screwdriver jammed into his belly. Jesse Gerstner, his face bloated and black, the belt cinched into the puffy flesh of his neck. And Lloyd, a ragged, gaping wound leaking body fluids down between his legs.

In surreal slow motion they marched toward him ranged across the highway. Their mouths gaped wide in silent anguish.

As he was almost upon them, Kyle yanked the steering wheel to the right. There was a bang under the right front fender. In a flash of recollection Kyle saw the boy in the Bulls jacket working at the wheel with a lug wrench.

The free wheel rolled serenely ahead of them down the dark

road. The jeep dipped to the right and with a screech of metal on concrete veered off course. The faces of the three Gerstners slid past the open window at his elbow, and Kyle could hear the rustle of their dry, dead laughter.

He saw the telephone pole, thick and sturdy in the wash of the headlights. Then it slid into darkness as the Jeep spun and skidded. And skidded.

His brain exploded in bright white light. And the cacophonous sound of rending metal. And blinding pain. And finally, darkness.

The Jeep broadsided the telephone pole with explosive force. For many minutes the only sound was the hiss of steam from the ruptured radiator and the drip of fluids from the torn underside of the Jeep. Gradually the night creatures, startled into silence by the crash, resumed their chittering and chirping. Then there was movement.

A door of the Jeep shuddered, creaked, and at last burst open. A body tumbled out, gathered itself, and pulled erect on shaky legs. Marianne steadied herself, then crouched to peer into the wreck at the young man in the driver's seat. His hands still gripped the steering wheel. His body was skewed to the right by the force of the impact. The top left part of his skull was gone, torn away by the iron climbing spike of the telephone pole. His face was a dark crimson mask. The yellow-gray jelly of the exposed brain quivered in the night air.

Moving slowly and deliberately, Marianne crawled back into the passenger's compartment. She worked her hands under Kyle's lifeless arms and pulled. He was caught in the seat, jammed there by the bashed-in side of the vehicle. She tugged and twisted and heaved at the body until at last it pulled free. She backed out, dragging Kyle with her. His shattered head left a trail of blood and brain matter.

Outside she lay him on the ground on his back. With a ragged

sleeve of her sweater she mopped away the blood where it had pooled in his eyes. He stared sightlessly at the empty sky. His mouth hung open as though frozen in an ultimate howl.

She rose and walked unsteadily to the side of the road. There she stood, a ragged, reeking figure … and waited.

Her wait was not a long one. Headlights approached from the direction in which they had come. Rattling and wheezing from the trip, the battered camper of The Mysterious Dorando rolled to a stop where she stood.

The tall Gypsy stepped down, walked past Marianne to where the corpse lay.

"I see I am too late to help him," he said. "In his ignorance and his youth, he asked for the wrong thing."

He turned and walked back to Marianne. "In paying my debt to the boy I have done you grievous wrong, young woman. I am now released from that debt. Say the word and I will give you the peace that has been denied you."

"No," she whispered.

"What, then? If there is some way I can atone for causing you pain, ask and it is yours."

"Anything?"

"Anything that is in my power."

Marianne walked over to the corpse, then turned and looked back at the Gypsy. The empty white eyeball gleamed in the wash of the camper's headlights.

"Bring him back," she said.

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